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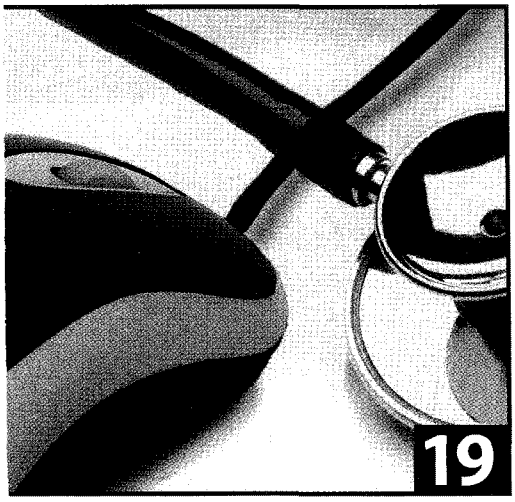

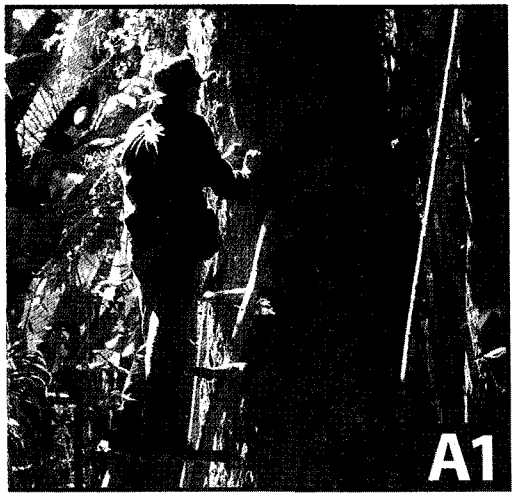

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Subscription Rates: U.S. and possessions: one year, $44.95; two years, $79.95; three years, $109.95. For Canadian and foreign subscriptions: add $10 per subscription year. Back issues, $6. *Washington Monthly* is indexed in the Book Review Index, Political Science Abstracts, Public Affairs Information Service, the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature, and Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory and may be obtained on microfilm from University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.
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Editorial Offices: 1200 18th Street, NW, Suite 330, Washington, DC 20036; telephone 202-955-9010; fax 202-955-9011. Unsolicited manuscripts can be e-mailed to editors@washingtonmonthly.com or sent to the editorial offices.

Washington Monthly (ISSN 0043-0633) is published bimonthly by Washington Monthly LLC, 1200 18th Street, NW, Suite 330, Washington, DC 20036. Washington Monthly LLC is wholly owned by W. M. Corporation, a District of Columbia 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Washington Monthly, 1200 18th Street, NW, Suite 330, Washington, DC 20036.

www.washingtonmonthly.com

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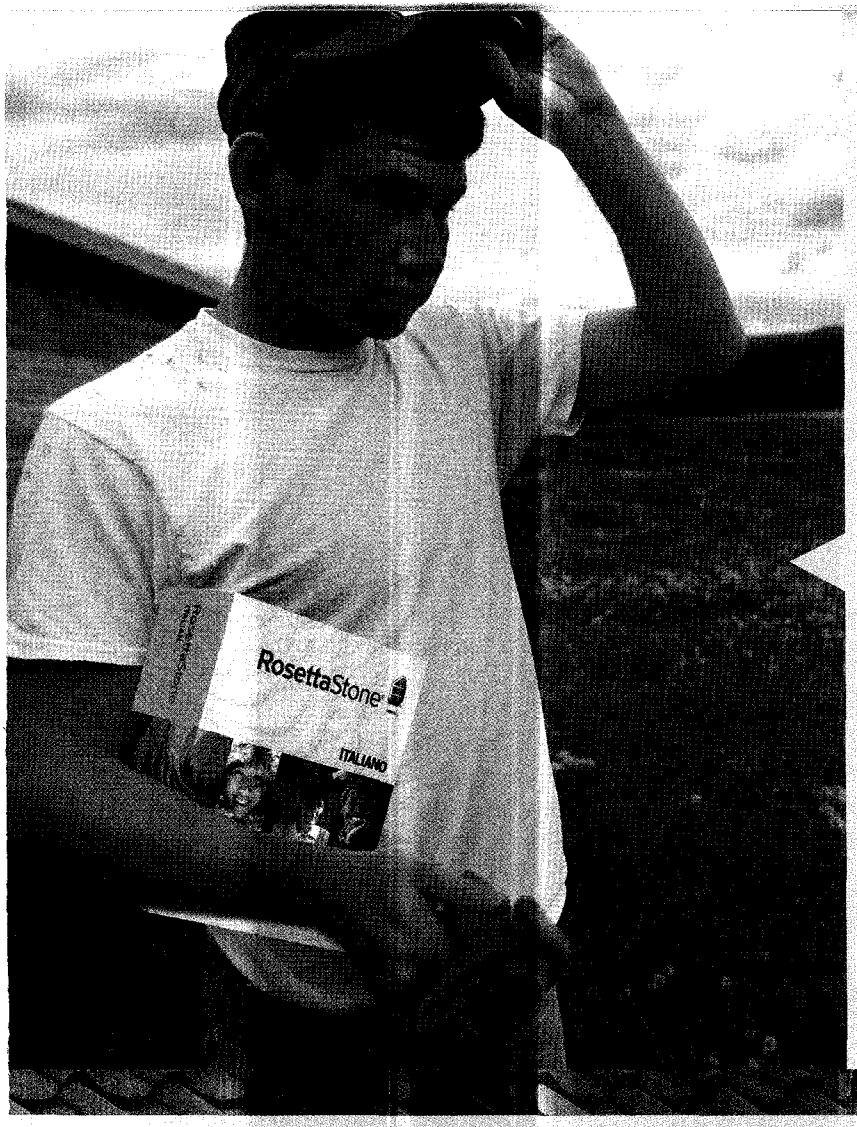

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Editor's Note

PAUL GLASTRIS

Athens 2.0

When the Founding Fathers were designing the American system of government, they carefully studied previous models, especially the democracies of ancient Greece. They came away determined not to copy a key Greek idea: the direct, participatory democracy that held sway in Athens between roughly 500 and 300 BC. Such democracy, they judged, led to fractiousness and instability, with amateur assemblies making unsound decisions based on the manipulative sophistry of honey-tongued orators. And so instead of Athenian-style participatory democracy, the American Founders crafted a representative one in which the direct role of the citizen in government affairs was minimal.

The Founders, however, may have had their facts wrong. In his new book, *Democracy and Knowledge*, Stanford classicist Josiah Ober draws on a plethora of recent scholarship to show that ancient Athens was not the chaotic and fragile polity the Founders envisioned. Rather, for 200 years, it outperformed all other Greek city-states, including authoritarian archrival Sparta, by almost every measure archeologists have devised—estimates of household wealth, number of public buildings, mentions of the city in extant Greek literature, distribution of coinage. Even after the fall of its military empire in the Peloponnesian Wars, Athens retained its commercial and cultural supremacy. This most flourishing of city-states was also among the most hyper-democratic. And that, Ober argues, was not a coincidence.

It's well known that laws in ancient Athens were passed by votes in the public assembly at which any citizen (males only) could participate. But the group that set the agenda for the assembly, called the Council of 500, was itself radically democratic. It consisted of representatives of neighborhoods and villages throughout Attica, chosen for one-year terms not through elections but by lot. Hence its members tended not to be elites or charismatic individuals but normal, random Athenians. It was as if Nancy Pelosi's job were done by a large focus group.

Ober argues that the democratic nature of the council served not just to transmit the broader public's preferences, but to aggregate its on-the-ground knowledge. The fisherman brought with him knowledge of wind patterns; the farmer, a sense of coming crop yields; the urban craftsman, familiarity with industrial production. Most citizens wound up serving at least once on the council, and on the smaller administrative boards that carried out the assembly's decrees. So when they cast votes in the assembly, they did so with personal knowledge of how government worked. Athenian democracy was thus a vast "learning machine," says Ober, capable of flushing out relevant facts and adapting itself quickly to changing circumstances.

The Athenians structured their government for maximum participation in every conceivable way. Instead of just taxing the rich, they set up competitions among the wealthy to see who, for instance, could outfit a warship and deliver it to the docks of Pireaus in the shortest amount of time, with the winner receiving a gold crown and the esteem of fellow Athenians.

The American system of government, by contrast, asks its citizens for consent but very limited participation. We are welcome to get involved in the political process once every four years by voting, sending money, knocking on doors. But when the campaigns are over, very little is asked of us, other than perhaps to follow the news, cooperate with pollsters, and, in the midst of war, go shopping.

Modern information technology, however, has a naturally Athenian bent, and it is beginning to challenge the government-by-elites system devised by the Founders. We've seen how the blogosphere draws normal citizens into sophisticated, dynamic conversations about public issues, and affects, at least on the margins, the course of politics and policy. We've seen the Twitter revolution in Iran, which is not only confronting the government there but allowing average Americans to have direct electronic connections with protesters on the streets of Tehran—to act, in a way, like micro-diplomats.

Citizen-empowering technologies such as these are evolving organically at the periphery of governing. But efforts are under way to consciously adapt them to engage more directly the public's energies for public ends. For instance, last year, District of Columbia Chief Technology Officer Vivek Kundra opened up stores of raw city-government data and, taking a page from the Athenians, challenged enterprising computer programmers to a contest to come up with useful applications for the information—a concept he is now pursuing nationwide as Obama's tech czar, as Charles Homans reports in the current issue ("The Geekdom of Crowds," page 13). Also in this issue, Phillip Longman explains how government efforts to digitize medical records, if done right, could tap the aggregated wisdom of doctors, nurses, and researchers to achieve the cost savings and quality improvements the president seeks in health care reform ("Code Red," page 19).

No one can say what the Founders, were they alive today, would make of blogs or Twitter or recent archeological findings about the ancient Greek democracy. I suspect, though, that in light of these new developments, they would urge us to put more of the Athenian spirit into the government they bequeathed us. WM

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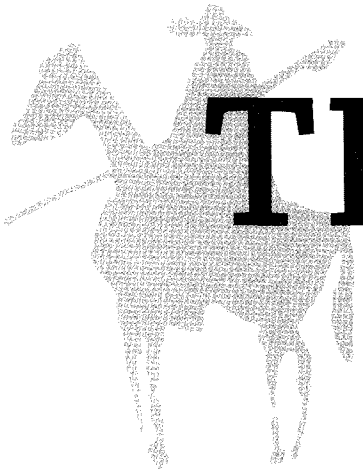

TILTING *at windmills*

By Charles Peters

Obama's Vietnam?

In a haunting reminder of Vietnam's body counts, the U.S. Army has begun publicizing every Taliban fighter killed, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. Another reminder of Vietnam comes from a *New York Times* report that Army investigators have determined that civilians at Granai, Afghanistan, were attacked in violation of the rules of engagement regarding "putting high-density village dwellings at risk."

I've been working on a book about Lyndon Johnson, and have had to face the fact that the case against the Vietnam War that seems so compelling in retrospect did not seem nearly so obvious in the war's early years. Of the thirty or so civilian or military advisers that Johnson consulted in the July 1965 decision to commit enough American troops to take over the ground war, only two dissented: Undersecretary of State George Ball and Senator Mike Mansfield. Even supposed doves like Bill Moyers and Dick Goodwin remained silent. As late as the summer of 1966, Neil Sheehan, who later wrote perhaps the most damning indictment of the war, *A Bright Shining Lie*, wrote an article for the *New York Times Magazine* saying that, though no longer a hawk, he was against surrendering.

Similarly, today there is a very persuasive case for staying the course in Afghanistan. Indeed, Peter Bergen makes it in this issue. But it seems to me there is enough reason to doubt success to wonder if it is worth the American and Afghan lives that will be lost in its pursuit. I find it very hard to accept the cruelty of sending soldiers to Afghanistan after they have endured three or four tours in Iraq.

Even if we eradicate al-Qaeda, won't other terrorist groups arise? I think that our best hope for the withering of the terrorist impulse rests not with war, but with the diplomatic approach that Obama so eloquently expressed in Cairo. To be sure, there will always be just plain bad guys and dangerous lunatics from which society must protect itself. But effective security measures, not war, are the way to do that.

> The only Democratic senator to serve as a school superintendent—and as an outstanding one—was not put on the Education Committee by Harry Reid.

What's experience got to do with it?

Why is the only senator to have served as a superintendent of schools not on the Senate Education Committee? Michael Bennet, the new senator from Colorado, was in fact such an outstanding superintendent that he was the subject of an article by our former editor Katherine Boo in the *New Yorker*. Yet Harry Reid decided not to place him on the Education Committee. Reid is said to be saving the seat for Al Franken.

The good news about the bad news about the news

I have often lamented the gulf between the affluent classes and the down-and-out that has developed in this country in the last half century, and the resulting lack of empathy for the less fortunate. I would contrast it to my childhood, where my middle-class parents still identified with their poor relatives on the farm. I could recall that as late as the 1950s, when I was a lawyer for the *Charleston Gazette*, the newsroom still regarded itself as blue collar, a far cry from today's newsrooms, dominated by people whose backgrounds rarely involved economic hardship.

Now, as a serendipitous consequence of our current unemployment, the empathy situation may be improving. Barbara Ehrenreich, whose wonderful *Nickel and Dimed* proved she never lost her capacity to care, said this in a commencement speech to the graduating journalism students at the University of California at Berkeley: "You have abundant skills and talent—it's just not clear that any-

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one wants to pay you for them. Well, you are not alone. How do you think it feels to be an autoworker right now? They've got skills; they've got experience; they just don't have jobs. So let me be the first to say to you: Welcome to the American working class."

Streeter to greeter

And it's not just journalists who are waking up. The *Wall Street Journal* recently ran an article about Carlos Araya, a Wall Streeter who lost his $200,000 job in the meltdown of the finance industry, and is now earning $25,000 as a restaurant host. He tells the *Journal*'s Mary Pilon: "I used to see unemployed people and think that they were lazy, that it was all on them. Now it's happened to me."

Does Obama assume the jobless and the foreclosed will vote Democratic next year?

Deal me out

"Senators Blast Automakers Over Dealer Closings," was the *Washington Post's* headline for a story about a June hearing of the Commerce Committee. I found that my heart did not automatically break at the plight of the dealers. Too many of them have made me suffer through hours of pressure in one of those small rooms in which dealers love to imprison the customer—until he agrees to a deal that is much more of a deal for the dealer than for him. In these sessions, numbers are jumbled like shells and peas until the customer surrenders, totally confused but desperate to escape the small room.

Still, there was one dealer whose predicament elicited my sympathy. He had been pressed by Chrysler all through the winter to buy more and more cars, to keep the auto company afloat. Now Chrysler was telling him that he had to sell the eight-month supply of cars he had accumulated not as new, but as used, meaning he almost certainly had to sell them at a loss.

Please let me out!

This item reminded me of one I reported several years ago. "In one remarkable case, a Texas jury found that a Tarrant County salesman trapped a deaf and mute customer for four hours, taking his keys and hiding them. 'Let me go home,' the customer pleaded in one note to the salesman, according to court documents. 'I'm very hungry and if you mail me good deal then maybe I come over here to buy!'"

Maybe if my name were Ahmed Peters ...

Last year, one in four Pentagon employees or contractors who were granted top-secret clearances had "significant derogatory information" in his or her background, according to a recent study by the Government Accountability Office. One example: a translator for the U.S. military in Iraq was cleared even though he lied about his name and his biography, and later admitted to taking bribes and removing classified files from his office and having "unauthorized phone and e-mail contact ... with Sunni sheiks in the Sunni Triangle." Without knowing more, we can't of course be sure of how many of the others granted clearance were truly dangerous. I suspect that it was only a few. But even a few is troubling.

My own experience with security clearances does not inspire confidence. When I joined the Peace Corps staff in April 1961, my first assignment was to coordinate and evaluate security investigation reports from the FBI. One problem was that I had not been cleared myself. I never mentioned that fact to my contacts in the FBI, nor did they ever seem aware of it. Nonetheless, each time I got a call from the Bureau, I was apprehensive. I feared that my own background investigation by the FBI's field agents might reveal that I had had a Communist roommate during my second term at Columbia and that one of my friends was the notorious homosexual Allen Ginsberg, neither of which seemed likely to make a favorable impression on the FBI in 1961. But in the event, neither fact was uncovered by the agents in the field.

In one sense, I find this comforting, since neither fact should've cast doubt on my loyalty. But in another sense, I remain troubled by the fact that the investigators failed to unearth facts that would've seemed highly significant to them at the time. Today, many of these security investigations are done by people far less skilled than the FBI agents of 1961, so common sense tells you that a lot of relevant facts are missed.

Who's watching the watch list?

The FBI has mistakenly kept 24,000 innocent people on its terrorist watch list, according to the report of the Department of Justice's inspector general, Glenn Fine. Even worse, it failed to place on the list people who definitely belong there. This is not only terribly unfair to the people incorrectly named, but it's frightening in terms of those who should be on the list but are not. Fine's inspectors scrutinized a sample of 216 FBI investigations of terrorism, and found that thirty-five of the subjects had not been put on the list.

Dangerous cargo

In June, as the luggage from a flight originating in Ethiopia was being unloaded at Dulles Airport, outside of D.C., a stowaway emerged from among the bags. A Customs and Border Protection official assured the *Washington Post* that "the process worked" because the stowaway had been found before he could do any harm.

Suppose, however, that instead of stowing himself among the plane's bags, he had planted a bomb designed to explode while the plane was in flight, perhaps even while it was descending on the densely populated Washington area? This should remind us that one of the two main deficiencies of our protection against terrorism in the air—our inability to guard against bombs put aboard in foreign cities—still exists.

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So does the other vulnerability, private aircraft, especially private jets that can be flown by terrorists into buildings in a grotesque repetition of 9/11. Several announcements have been made that the government will do something about this problem. But as far as I can determine, nothing seems to have actually been done, probably because the security measures that the rest of us endure at airports are too annoying to be accepted by private pilots, many of whom are rich or influential. They love being able to drive to the door of their plane and board without delay. There is minimal security at the general aviation terminals private pilots use at commercial airports, and those private airstrips they insist on having are practically impossible to make secure. But is there any reason to believe that these pilots are any less likely to be terrorists, or to be subject to blackmail or some other means of control by terrorists, than are you and I? And their unguarded planes are a lure for hijackers.

United we scam

"Let me offer Congress two pieces of advice" about health care, writes Paul Krugman. Both turn out to be the same: "Don't trust the insurance industry." I agree. Insurance companies are bound to resist any reform that might decrease their profits, and they profit from minimizing the amount they reimburse their policyholders, and by keeping the policyholder from having a choice of less expensive but equally good or better coverage.

I continue to see great danger in the White House's treating the AARP as a major player in health care reform. The AARP, as I repeatedly go on about, is a front for insurance companies, the main one being United Healthcare. We recently reported how United executives had been forced by a government agency to repay large sums they had improperly paid themselves. Now comes the news that New York's attorney general has found that United had been a principal player in "a scheme to defraud consumers." Those who watch cable television will recognize the United commercial that plays almost every hour for its Medicare supplement insurance, in which a "regular guy" reassuringly declares, "If it's good enough for AARP, it's good enough for me." Or simply, "And it's endorsed by AARP." As if God has spoken.

Nonprofit in name only

As we pointed out in the March/April issue, most "nonprofit" hospitals do not provide uncompensated care to the poor. Yet they receive the lion's share of the $12.6 billion of annual tax exemptions given nonprofit hospitals.

Not surprisingly, the American Hospital Association has, according to the *New York Times*, begun a lobbying campaign to prevent Congress from enacting a proposal before the Senate Finance Committee that would require hospitals to provide "a minimum amount of charitable care" in order to get or keep tax-exempt status.

Doctors on the take

And a final health item: the Vermont legislature has enacted a law that requires drug and medical device makers to, in the words of the *New York Times*, "publicly disclose all money given to physicians and other health care providers, naming names and listing dollar amounts."

To the best of my knowledge, Vermont is the first state to require disclosure of names. But the dimensions of the scandal are suggested by the figures from a state as small as West Virginia, where amounts but not names are disclosed: last year 574 physicians received payments exceeding $2,500, according to the *Charleston Gazette*, forty-two got more than $20,000, five more than $100,000. For a general practitioner in West Virginia, none of these sums is chicken feed. And when they reach $20,000, they approach outright bribery. And just imagine the take of physicians in Manhattan.

Can I help you with that golden parachute?

The *Washington Post*'s Zachary Goldfarb has detailed how George W. Bush's choice of chairman of the SEC, Christopher Cox, "adopted practices that undermined the enforcement division's effort to investigate cases of corporate wrongdoing and punish those involved." I would caution, however, that many of the SEC's problems run deeper than its leadership. Number one among these is a culture remarkably similar to the Pentagon's, where employees coddle contractors in order to get jobs with the contractor after they retire.

At the SEC, they want their reward to come much more quickly. After a few years at the commission, they expect to get top jobs in the finance industry, which means of course that they have every reason to be indulgent about the foibles of their potential employer. Michael Lewis, whose coverage of the finance industry has been brilliant, recently pointed out on Fareed Zakaria's CNN show that four out of the last five SEC directors of enforcement had gone straight to Wall Street.

> If we have to send soldiers to Afghanistan who have already endured three or four combat tours, is it worth it?

Jobless, foreclosed, but voting

In January, the new administration was telling us that saving the banks was the key to restoring economic health. It appeared to some of us that creating jobs and stopping foreclosures were even more important. Though the administration did not ignore our worries—it soon came up with a stimulus package to create jobs and a program to help homeowners faced with foreclosure—the immediate drama and the main early focus of Timothy Geithner and Larry Summers was on saving their

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pals on Wall Street. And they now appear to have had at least some success in that effort.

The news on foreclosures, however, is not good. "Treasury Secretary Timothy F. Geithner told a Senate panel Tuesday," reported the *Washington Times* on Wednesday, June 10, "he won't know for several months whether a key Obama administration program designed to help homeowners avoid foreclosure will be successful." Numerous news reports confirm that the program has not yet taken hold.

As for jobs, the situation is a little scary. Two weeks before Geithner's foreclosure statement, the administration announced that thus far the stimulus program had created and saved 150,000 jobs. Unfortunately, the economy has lost about 1.5 million jobs since the stimulus bill was passed. The administration's prediction that unemployment would peak at 8 percent has already been proved optimistic, as the figure has now passed 9 percent and seems almost certain to reach 10 or more.

In a piece we wrote for *Slate* in January, and on which I elaborated here in our March/April issue, Tim Noah and I worried that the stimulus plan would not create jobs fast enough to meet the need, and warned that instead of imitating Harold Ickes's PWA, which took six months to create 100,000 jobs, the administration should follow the example of Harry Hopkins's Civil Works Administration, which created four million in two months. I now repeat that recommendation, and pray that Obama will not dither long before he acts. High unemployment could easily kill the chances of retaining or enlarging a sympathetic majority in Congress. I believe that despite Obama's mistakes, he still has the potential to be one of our greatest presidents, and I know that having a sympathetic Congress is essential to achieving that potential.

> The culture of the SEC, like the Pentagon's, encourages officials to coddle the companies they oversee in hopes of being rewarded with future employment.

When dithering breeds dithering

As to the cost of dithering, I know of no better example than Bill Clinton's hesitating in 1993 to order equality for gays in the military, just as Harry Truman had ordered for blacks in 1948. By leaving it to Congress, which made "don't ask, don't tell" the law, he made it at best problematic for Obama to now issue such an order. It would appear that he has to go through Congress, which would mean endless fulminations, not only on the floor of the House and Senate but on the cable channels, stirring up all the extremists. I think in the interest of justice and fair play, Obama has to take a stand on this issue, but I understand why Clinton's dithering in 1993 makes it extremely difficult.

The agency that dithers

Speaking of dithering, one Washington agency that has excelled in this regard is the FAA. Never quick to act, it usually waits until a plane has crashed before it does anything. Even then, its spinelessness can be maddening. After *six* fatal commuter airline crashes, including the one outside Buffalo, demonstrated dangerous deficiencies in the commuter airlines, including inadequate rest and compensation for pilots, poor training practices, and pilots continuing to fly after failing several exams, what does the FAA do? It announces that in a few months, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, it "*hopes to draft* tougher rules." (Italics mine.)

The reason reform has to be mandatory is that the unsafe practices are a product of competition to keep fares low. Unless all airlines have to obey the rules, those who do so voluntarily risk losing ground in their competition with other airlines.

Empathy for the airlines

Special praise should go to the reporters who dug deep into the story behind the Buffalo air crash: Andy Paszton and Susan Carey of the *Wall Street Journal*, and Alan Chernoff and Laura Dolan of CNN. Among the facts they dug up: the Gulfstream Air Academy—the one that trained Melvin Renslow, the captain who turned the Colgan Air Continental Connection plane nose up instead of down, as he should have done—gives amateurs 250 hours of on-the-job training, plus 250 hours of flying time, and then installs them as copilots on Continental Connection flights in Florida and the Bahamas. Major airlines require copilots to have 1,500 hours of flying time.

Gulfstream International Airlines, like Colgan, the Buffalo airline, flies as Continental Connection. Congressional investigators say it falsifies flight time records, and forces crews to fly more hours than allowed by federal rules. Even the FAA has complained of its faulty maintenance practices. When a pilot said he wasn't comfortable flying with a malfunctioning collision avoidance system, the airline fired him on the spot.

Similarly, when an FAA inspector reported before the Buffalo crash that Colgan Air pilots had difficulty operating the aircraft involved, the Bombardier-Q400, and had actually "botched" three landing attempts, according to Matthew Wald of the *New York Times*, the FAA relieved him of his duties of overseeing Colgan's operations, and gave him a desk job.

And this is hard to believe, but when the FAA's head, J. Randolph Babbitt, was asked by Senator Frank Lautenberg whether failing multiple flight tests should disqualify a pilot, the answer, according to the *Washington Post*, was, "'people are human,' and that he had seen situations where pilots had a bad day."

Fox investments in henhouses are up, too

Moody's stock price is up 44 percent, reports David Gillen of the *New York Times*.

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This is frightening. It must represent a Wall Street consensus that Moody's will escape reform, although it and the other rating agencies failed miserably to warn investors of last year's financial disaster.

These agencies not only need to be regulated, a system must be devised so they do not rely on compensation from the companies they evaluate. My suggestion is that the corporations who are rated should contribute to a general fund from which raters are paid.

Of bare bottoms and badges

I regret to report that two of my pet peeves remain unchanged. One is those humiliating hospital gowns, which constantly threaten to expose one's posterior. Despite a grant by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to encourage a new design, the hospitals continue to be wedded to the open-air version. I agree with the Johnson Foundation's Rosemary Gibson, who calls these gowns "a symbol of what needs to change in health care."

My other pet peeve is the fact that the police never seem to be around when a crime is committed, but once the event has occurred, especially if it seems likely to attract TV cameras, ten to twenty police cars immediately descend on the scene. I actually counted twenty-seven at a recent crime scene in California. Typically, scads of cops stand around, usually with hands on hips, and rarely looking like they are doing anything.

Doing right when it's hard to do

The city of Baltimore has been a hotbed of witness intimidation. Fear of retaliation keeps witnesses from telling about crimes they have seen. The problem is nationwide, especially in urban areas, of which the worst for many years has been Baltimore, where criminals routinely escape prison by threatening the people who might testify against them.

But here's good news: in May, a federal grand jury convicted Patrick A. Byers Jr. of arranging the killing of a witness who had been prepared to state that Byers was the gunman in an earlier murder. Byers has been sentenced to life without parole.

This is exactly what he deserves. Witness intimidation prevents justice from being done. It merits the most severe punishment. But it takes real guts to convict a criminal whose pals might not only retaliate against witnesses, but against anyone involved in the conviction. Bless these jurors, the prosecutor, and the judge for having the courage to overcome this fear and do the right thing. WM

Charles Peters is the founding editor of the *Washington Monthly.*

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"... such District (not exceeding ten Miles square) ... [shall] become the Seat of the Government of the United States"
THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES

Cuba Notwithstanding

Could this summer's hurricanes blow away the trade embargo?

By Patrick C. Doherty

For half a century, the United States has pursued a policy of isolating Cuba in the vain hope that doing so would lead to the downfall of the island's Communist regime. Today that policy is one of the last great historical anachronisms of the Cold War, outliving the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, despite the fact that it has never accomplished what it was supposed to do. Political realists such as Henry Kissinger have argued for years that the policy undercuts U.S. diplomatic efforts on a host of fronts because it is so widely disliked by other countries, especially in the Western Hemisphere. (It is one of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's most successful talking points.) Human rights groups like Amnesty International have long pointed out that the embargo is an obstacle to improving human rights conditions, not an aid. Meanwhile, greater trade with the United States has led to better lives and greater—if not necessarily complete—freedoms for the citizens of other countries with Communist governments, such as China and Vietnam. And yet, thanks to intransigent conservative ideology and the outsized electoral influence of Florida's Cuban American voters, the policy of near-complete isolation has endured.

For the last several months, however, the Obama administration has moved slowly, step by incremental step, away from the policy. In March, the president signed a budget bill easing Bush-era restrictions on how often Cuban Americans can visit the island and how much remittance money they can send to relatives there. In April, he eliminated such restrictions altogether, and also gave U.S. telecom firms permission to pursue licensing deals with Cuba to expand cell phone, broadband, and other communications services. Then, in May, his administration offered to resume direct mail service to the island for the first time in decades, and to begin negotiations on issues involving migration—offers the Cuban government readily accepted. Finally, in June, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton brokered a deal to allow Cuba to rejoin the Organization of American States if it meets key benchmarks of democratic reform. (Cuba was not so quick to take up that offer.) Meanwhile, the White House has been watching with interest efforts on Capitol Hill to repeal the law that bans American tourists from visiting the island—efforts that stand a surprisingly decent chance of garnering majority support in both the House and Senate by this fall.

The next logical step—and by far the biggest and most controversial—would be to end the United States's forty-seven-year-old trade embargo on Cuba. When he was a state senator, Obama called for doing exactly that. But he backtracked four years later, as presidential candidates inevitably do. In a speech in Miami to the Cuban American National Foundation, a bastion of support for the existing policy, Obama promised to end the restrictions on Cuban American travel and remittances to Cuba but said, "as president I'm not going to [end] the embargo; it's an important inducement for change." This is more or less his position today.

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But the president and his senior advisers also understand a key political fact: on November 6, 2008, Obama won Florida with only 35 percent of the Cuban American vote. In fact, he is the first U.S. president since the Cuban Revolution who is not beholden to that voting bloc for his victory in the state. In other words, he is the first president to have the political running room to lift the embargo.

And here's the most interesting part: he doesn't necessarily need Congress's support to do it. Under the right conditions, he can lift the embargo unilaterally. Those conditions are dictated by, of all things, the weather.

By dint of its location, Cuba is a nearly perennial target of tropical storms. Last year saw Cuba absorb four direct hits by hurricane-force storms, wiping out a third of the island's agricultural production, damaging or destroying a third of its housing, devastating its electrical grid, and eliminating 20 percent of its GDP. It was, many experts say, the worst storm season ever.

In the wake of that disaster, the Cuban government was somehow able to patch together enough international credit to avert mass starvation. It did so only by importing enough food to increase its monthly ration from 50 percent of the nation's calories to 75 percent. Indeed, reports from the island suggest that Havana had to choose between importing food and importing building materials: much, if not most, of the housing that was damaged in the 2008 storms has yet to be rebuilt. And with tourism down, nickel prices down, and last year's tobacco crop flattened—and with Venezuela, Cuba's most important regional ally and budget subsidizer, reeling from the drop in oil prices—Havana's sources of cash are not keeping up with its mounting debt.

This year the National Hurricane Center predicts fourteen named storms and up to seven major hurricanes in the Atlantic basin. In its present weakened condition, just a single direct hit by a major hurricane could overwhelm the Cuban government's ability to meet the basic needs of its people. A storm like last year's Hurricane Ike—which came ashore as a Category 3 storm and chewed up the length of the island from east to west—could be catastrophic.

If Cuba were any other country, the United States would efficiently arrange assistance through the U.S. Agency for International Development. However, as the Bush administration learned last September, Cuba will not accept direct humanitarian assistance from the United States. The Cubans' rationale, one has to admit, has a certain logic: if a man is being choked, does it make sense for him to accept a glass of water from the person who's choking him?

That's where things get interesting. If, by extraordinarily bad luck, Cuba does get severely battered, the government may not be able to deliver enough food, reconstruction aid, and, frankly, coercion to prevent the people from voting with their boats. Before long, we could see a wave of seagoing humanity motoring, paddling, and floating the ninety miles to the coast of South Florida. After all, it's happened before, twice—once in 1980, and again in 1994.

If a major storm hits, President Obama will face a choice. Like George Bush, he could offer assistance. Like Bill Clinton, he could wait for the Cuban people to take to the sea and then order the Navy and Coast Guard to scoop up rafters and try to send them back. Or he could use the crisis to forge a bold new policy.

President Barack Obama doesn't necessarily need Congress's support to lift the trade embargo on Cuba. Under the right conditions he could lift it unilaterally, if he were so inclined. And those conditions are dictated by, of all things, the weather.

Here's how. In a little-known corner of the United States Code, the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, Congress gave the president extraordinary authority in times of humanitarian disaster: "[N]otwithstanding any other provision of this chapter or any other Act, the President is authorized to furnish assistance to any foreign country, international organization, or private voluntary organization, on such terms and conditions as he may determine, for international disaster relief and rehabilitation."

"Notwithstanding ... any other Act" means the president is not constrained by any other law passed by Congress as he responds to a disaster. And that gives the president the opportunity to convert a perfect storm into a strategic watershed: instead of offering the Cuban government direct assistance, which it will only reject, he could lift the embargo itself.

Structured properly—say, for a term of 180 days, during which the Cuban government and people could purchase nonmilitary items on the American market for cash or credit—the Obama administration could avert a humanitarian nightmare, win the goodwill of the Cuban people, provide significant economic stimulus to the southeastern United States, tie Hugo Chávez in knots, and make it possible for Congress to repeal the embargo at the end of the 180 days, when it is clear that America's national interests are best served by a policy of confident and generous strategic patience.

The president's chief of staff, Rahm Emmanuel, is famous for saying that one should never let a good crisis go to waste. One hopes that it would not take a significant uptick in human suffering to force a change in an antiquated piece of U.S. policy—but if it does, this might just be how it happens. WM

Patrick Doherty is the director of the U.S.-Cuba Policy Initiative at the New America Foundation.

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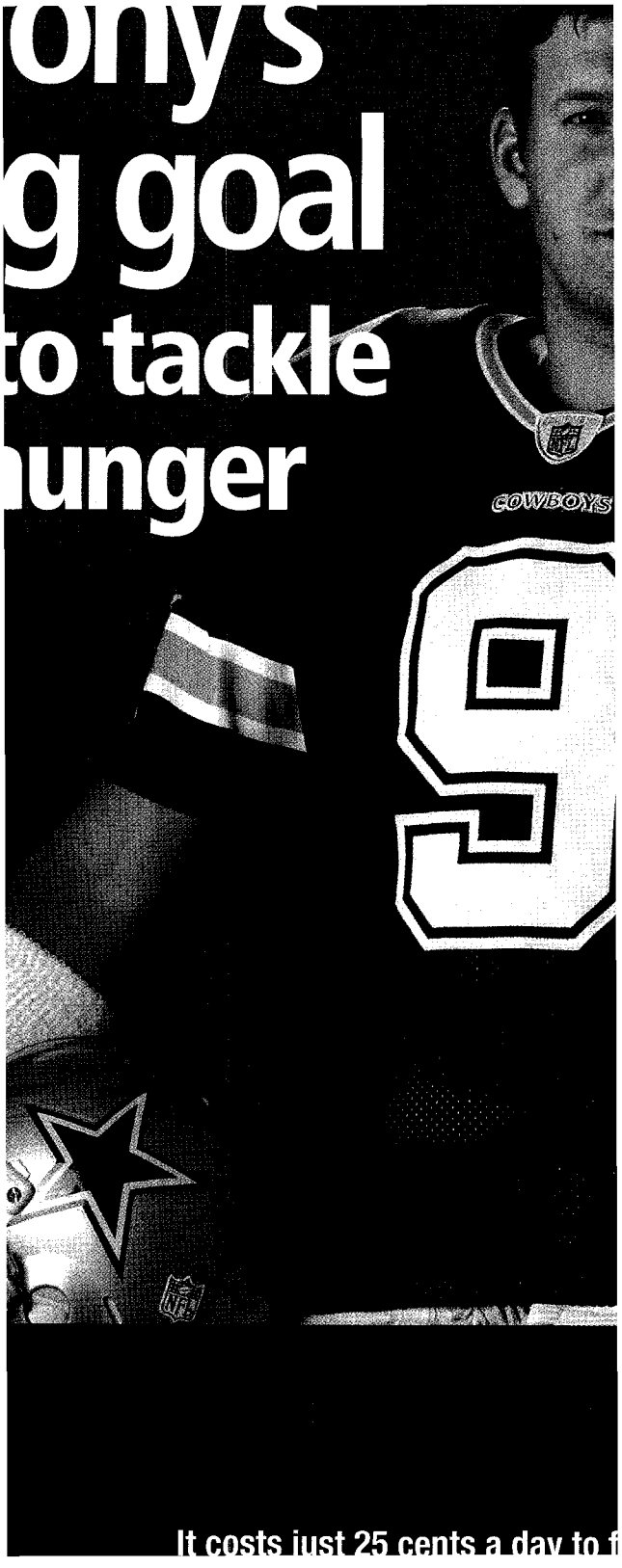

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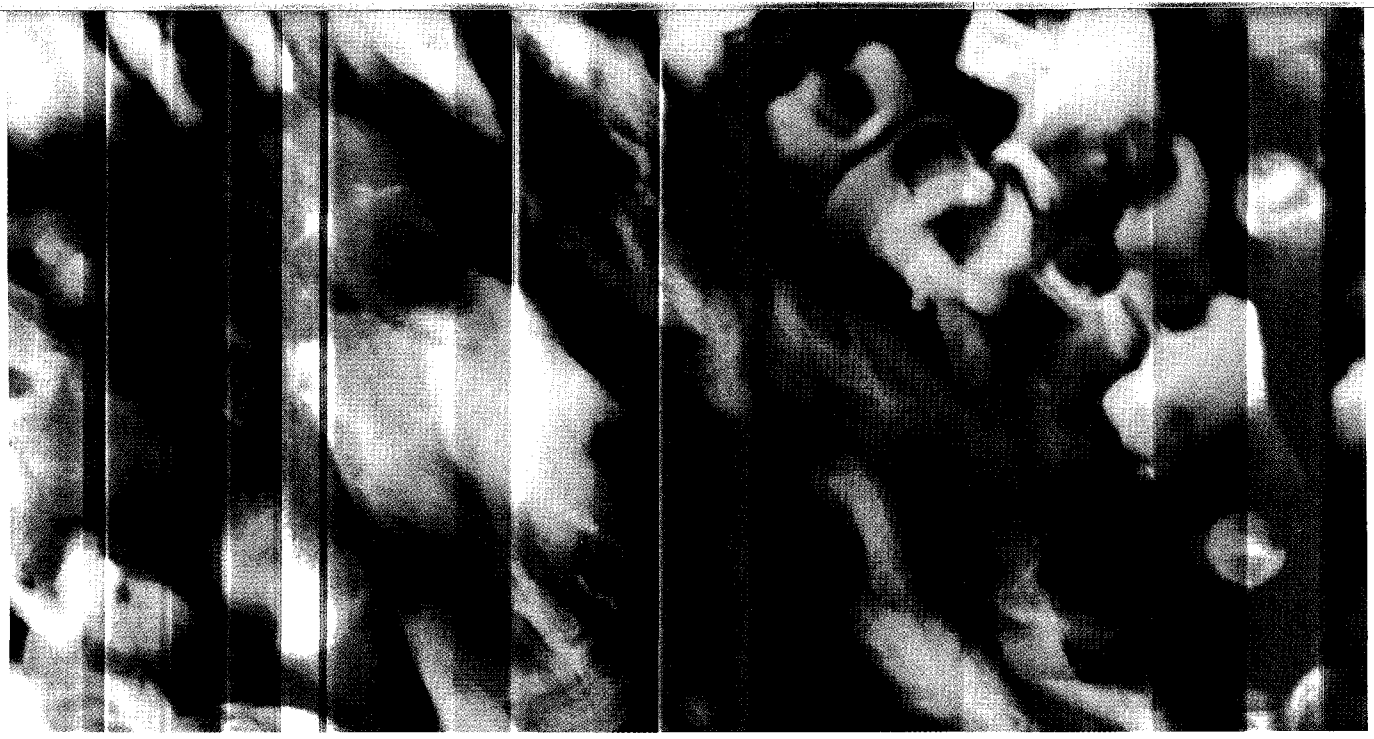

Toshihide Gotoh

The Geekdom of Crowds

The Obama administration experiments with data-driven democracy.

By Charles Homans

My favorite bar in Washington is the Raven Grill, a shoebox-shaped (and -sized) dive in the city's Mount Pleasant neighborhood. The second half of the bar's official name is a total lie, unless you count the overpriced beef jerky on the shelf next to the liquor bottles. But the beer is sold at prices otherwise unheard of in D.C., the north wall of the men's bathroom used to feature some very nice anatomical artwork, and the jukebox has been strategically stocked to thwart even the worst taste (the only real hazard is Bob Marley's "Legend"). Most crucially, the Raven is an easily walkable twelve blocks from my row house in neighboring Columbia Heights. The only real problem is that in the past year, those twelve blocks have been the site of seven robberies, eight assaults, and two homicides.

I know this because of a free, online computer application called Stumble Safely. The program plots recent criminal activity—what happened where, when—on a map of the neighborhoods surrounding popular nightspots in Northwest D.C., in a spattering of gray and red dots. Heading to or from the bar, I can find it on the map, select the relevant time of day, and look for the clusters of dots to see which corners might be worth avoiding. I can click on locations and get the police report of what exactly happened there: whether it was, say, a guy in a mask robbing a convenience store on 14th Street with a sawed-off shotgun (as happened around midnight on a Tuesday in January), or just someone's cell phone getting snatched up the block (11 p.m., August 28, 14th and Columbia Road). In short, any D.C. resident with an iPhone and a signal can now carry more crime data in his or her pocket than beat cops in even well-wired police departments had in their squad cars fifteen years ago.

Stumble Safely was designed by Eric Gundersen, the president of a small D.C.-based tech consulting firm called Development Seed—and, as it happens, a former bartender at the Raven, where I met him for a beer on an evening in early June. Gundersen is a tech guy in the freewheeling Silicon Valley mold, a bearish twenty-nine-year-old with a scruffy beard who dresses like a bike messenger—when I met him he was

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locking up an immaculate new creamsicle-colored fixed-gear bike in front of the bar—and lives on a houseboat on the Potomac River, tied up at D.C.'s southwest waterfront. As we settled into a booth by the jukebox, Gundersen explained that Stumble Safely was more a demonstration project than anything else—he wanted to show people the power of well-arranged government data. Development Seed, which Gundersen had cofounded five years ago while he was working on a master's degree in international development in Peru, had designed software and Web sites for the World Bank, the World Food Program, and the U.S. Agency for International Development, among others, building tools to map food aid deliveries in sub-Saharan Africa and flu pandemics in the developing world. "Maps forever have been about telling stories," Gundersen said. "A lot of the stories we work with are very complex—information from thousands of school districts, or all the bird flu data in Southeast Asia. But we wanted to tell stories that people would understand."

In October, Gundersen and his Development Seed colleagues entered a contest hosted by the district government, called Apps for Democracy. The contest was the brainchild of Vivek Kundra, then the district's chief technology officer, and it was conceived in order to try out a theory that Kundra, a thirty-four-year-old veteran of the Northern Virginia IT community, had: government data were useful in the government's own hands, but radically more so when people outside the bureaucracy had access to them. Advances in computing power, Internet connectivity, and open-source software development over recent years meant that more people were able to do more things with data; applications like Google and devices like the iPhone had increased the appetite among even the technologically semiliterate for the stuff.

The idea is often called Government 2.0: the notion that technology can not only make it easier to get the government's information, but can be turned back onto the government itself to make the bureaucracy more responsive to its constituents, a faster and smarter beast.

Kundra figured there were probably plenty of civic-minded geeks in the district with the ability to provide information-based government services better than the government itself could, or come up with new ones the city bureaucrats had never even thought of. Why not open up all the information the city could to them and see what happened?

Kundra's office made feeds of raw data—records of everything from trash collection to government employee purchases, provided in easily downloadable formats—available on the district's Web site, and offered a prize to the programmer who made the most enterprising use of them. Forty-seven entries arrived by the November deadline; Development Seed's Stumble Safely placed second, behind an online guide to historical walking tours. Other more substantive entries allowed users to track and discuss city procurement contracts and building permits. The district says that in all, the Apps for Democracy project alone saved the government some $2.3 million in software development.

That figure is pretty questionable—would the district really have paid someone to create Stumble Safely?—and Gundersen is the first to point out that the program Development Seed designed has its limits. "Most of these apps are bullshit," he told me at the bar. "Including mine—it's a bar-crawl site!" The point, he said, was to demonstrate the potential that was there: the opportunity for technology to transform the way citizens interact with their government. A simple application like Stumble Safely might allow a normally disengaged group of people—say, those of us who had chosen to be at the Raven on a weeknight instead of staying home to watch city council meetings on cable access—to visualize failures of public safety, and to ask questions about them. "The real benefits are going to come when community organizations get ahold of this [technology]," Gundersen said. "Can you imagine how cool this is going to be? Think of how politicians represent themselves and what they've done for their constituents." He set down his bottle of High Life and gestured emphatically with his fist: "Fuck that. They'll have to contend with apps that let people actually see *exactly* what they've done."

This idea is often called Government 2.0: the notion that information technology can not only make it easier to get the information government already produces, but can be turned back onto the government itself to make the bureaucracy more responsive to its constituents, a generally faster and smarter beast. The idea has gained prominent champions, not least President Obama, who ran a tech-savvy campaign last year (his was the first in which IT staff sat in on strategy meetings) that also promised transparency—a pledge on which he has delivered in some, if not all, cases since taking office. But no one within the government is now more closely associated with the concept than Kundra, who Obama tapped as his chief information officer in March. In May, Kundra launched Data.gov, a federal version of the online data clearinghouse he pioneered at the district, which is eventually supposed to catalog thousands of individual feeds of government information. The Sunlight Foundation, a nonprofit pushing the idea of using technology to foster transparency, is sponsoring Apps for America, a national version of the district-wide contest that produced Stumble Safely.

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But a funny thing has happened since Eric Gundersen launched his application: Stumble Safely has become less useful, rather than more so. When you click on the gray and red crime-indicating dots that have appeared on the map in the past few months, you don't get much information about what exactly happened—all you get is a terse, one-word description of the category of the incident ("assault," or "theft") and a time, with no details of whether it was a shootout or just a couple of kids punching each other in an alley.

This isn't Gundersen's fault—it's the cops'. Because while Kundra and the open-data community were fans of opening up the city's books, it turned out that the Metropolitan Police Department was not. Earlier this year, as apps like Stumble Safely grew in number and quality, the police stopped releasing the detailed incident reports—investigating officers' write-ups of what happened—into the city's data feed. The official reason for the change is concern over victims' and suspects' privacy. But considering that before the clampdown the reports were already being released with names and addresses redacted, it's hard to believe that's the real one. More likely, the idea of information traveling more or less unedited from cops' keyboards to citizens' computer screens made the brass skittish, and the department reacted the way bureaucracies usually do: it made public information harder to get. The imperatives of Government 2.0 were thwarted by the instincts of Government 1.0.

Whether it will always be thus is the question hanging over the whole open-data gambit: whether the past decade's worth of technological advances are enough to overcome habits that are as old as government itself. "Vivek Kundra has his work cut out for him," the Sunlight Foundation's Clay Johnson says. "I have nothing but respect for what he's trying to do. But it's a hard job, and it's going to take some time for this to actually happen right. I mean years."

Talking with an IT manager who is bent on rewiring the government is a strange experience. When I spoke with Kundra on the phone recently about his plans for the Obama administration, he used the same vocabulary as the office tech-support guy who patiently guides me through toolbar submenus when I call about a problem with my desktop. The difference was that Kundra was walking me through how to debug a 233-year-old democracy, not a five-year-old Dell. "What we're trying to accomplish is to fundamentally change the default setting in the public sector when it comes to information and transparency in general," he explained. "We want to by default assume that data is going to be public."

The decision to do this selectively in the past, Kundra argued, had paid dividends. When the National Institutes of Health's Human Genome Project decided to make publicly available the sequences of human DNA it had decoded, it spawned a wealth of innovation in pharmaceuticals. "We've had an explosion of discovery, and a pipeline of drugs moving through the FDA, as a result of that decision," Kundra said. In the 1980s, the Pentagon declassified a large portion of the data from its military satellites—"That gave birth to the GPS industry," he said.

The ultimate goal of all this was to "change this old way of thinking about government and institutions, to recognize that we don't have a monopoly on the best ideas," Kundra continued. "The best way to do it is to say, 'Look, here's what the government is doing, here's the data we have,' and challenge the American people to help us deal with some of the toughest problems we face."

Kundra seems a better fit for a big-thinking presidential administration than D.C. City Hall, which in general is less concerned with creating the government of the future than with simply putting space between Washington and Detroit in nationwide quality-of-life measures. The district was actually ahead of the curve on internal use of technology before he arrived in 2007, but Kundra's decision to use the district's IT office as a lab for data-driven civic participation led to some arched eyebrows—in a city where barely half the residents have home broadband connections, Kundra played unapologetically to the elite digerati, rather than the far larger group of people for whom XML sounds like a confusing shirt size. Most of the high-profile programs that Kundra instated, such as a wiki (a collectively editable Web page) designed to make city contracting more transparent, have been up and running for less than a year, so it's too soon to judge their success. But the city council oversight staffers who spoke with me on background about the technology office—with whom the council has had a fractious relationship—weren't holding their breath.

"Vivek Kundra has his work cut out for him," says the Sunlight Foundation's Clay Johnson. "I have nothing but respect for what he's trying to do. But it's a hard job, and it's going to take some time for this to happen right. I mean years."

"It may be like a nightclub that's popular—you get past the facade and it's just not a big deal," one of them says of Kundra's efforts. "I'm not saying the guy doesn't have some *oomph*—he may have some great ideas. But how much of it is fire and how much of it is smoke?" While Kundra was awaiting confirmation as Obama's tech czar this spring, two employees in his former district agency—including his top deputy for security—were arrested by federal agents for an alleged city-contracting bribery scheme. Kundra hasn't been implicated in

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the investigation, but the fact that it happened on his watch, while he was talking up plans to use technology to make contracting more transparent, suggests that maybe the district's tech office needed a hard-nosed taskmaster more than a starry-eyed visionary.

The federal government, however, could use a starry-eyed visionary. For an organization that has always been largely concerned with gathering information, it is often shockingly bad at actually using it. Part of the problem is technical—only in recent years has the technology been available to inexpensively make use of vast stores of data. Rigid organizational structures also keep information siloed in discrete agencies, making it difficult or impossible to compare figures across bureaucratic boundaries. A more fundamental barrier has been the reflexive aversion everyone has to being personally held accountable for their actions—something which, in the world of government bureaucracies, often translates into functionaries protecting their turf by hoarding information about it. "It's a basic human desire," says Jerry Mechling, a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government who studies the intersection of government and technology. "It's the instinct of a teenager: 'Where are you going?' 'Out.' 'When will you be back?' 'Later.'"

For organizations that have always been largely concerned with gathering information, governments are often shockingly bad at actually using it. With little outside pressure to behave otherwise, most of them remain data-squandering dinosaurs, slowly masticating and barely digesting the information they collect.

In the private sector, these tendencies are curbed by the need to compete—when the player with the best intelligence wins, you look at your numbers pretty closely. But governments don't face the same kind of outside pressure, and thus have remained data-squandering dinosaurs, slowly masticating and barely digesting the information they collect. Incredibly, it was only in the early '90s that the New York Police Department, weary of flailing blindly against ever-rising crime rates, began using crime statistics in a scientific fashion—a now widely emulated approach called computer statistics, or "compstat"—to deploy its resources more effectively. Washington's police department didn't adopt the strategy until five years ago.

The federal government has unique problems, too—there are whole categories of information it simply doesn't have. Consider education, on which the federal government spends $67 billion each year—we'd want to keep track of that money, right? In theory, yes, but in practice, not so much: the Department of Education knows how much each state gets, but figures for individual school districts—that is, the information that could actually help you figure out if the money is going where it's supposed to be going—are scattered across an array of state record-keeping systems that range from the excellent to (more frequently) the appalling. "That's where the real breakdown happens," says Jennifer Cohen, a policy analyst with the New America Foundation's Education Policy Program. "A lot of times, I'll get copies of dot-matrix printouts."

There are plenty of people who would like to keep things this way, not only bureaucrats seeking to avoid scrutiny but also politicians, for whom the opacity of the system makes it easy to discreetly reward constituents and campaign contributors. But the issue isn't only one of accountability—it's also a matter of the government simply being able to do the things it's supposed to do. When the Central Intelligence Agency famously failed to predict the fall of the Soviet Union, it was in part because the agency had kept classified basic agricultural and economic data it had collected, information that would have rendered the USSR's incipient collapse potentially foreseeable to economists had they had access to the numbers.

But something unprecedented has happened in the past decade: greater computing power, better software tools, and the ever-extending reach of the Internet have all democratized the once-rarified field of data use. Making sense of huge piles of raw information used to require a degree in computer science, a university lab mainframe's worth of circuits, and an awful lot of time. Now all it takes is an Internet connection and the ability to type in "Google." Once-expensive tools are basically free, and often better than their pricey predecessors. It used to be that if you wanted financial intelligence, you had to pay for the services of a ratings agency like Moody's, where analysts made sense of the data tapes gathered in person from the Securities and Exchange Commission. Now you can get a comparable analysis at Freerisk.org, a site launched by a pair of amateur programmers after last fall's financial meltdown (which Moody's failed to anticipate), where open-source software digests the same—now easily downloadable—SEC data.

Data enthusiasts like Cohen and Gundersen see in this changed information landscape the potential to do something big: leverage the interest of a newly enlightened public with ever-improving technological tools at its disposal to shine a giant spotlight on the inner workings of the government. Eventually we could see more clearly not just

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what the government is doing, but also how well what it's doing is actually working—for instance, tracking education reforms through a matrix of crime and employment data to gauge the rippling effects of policy decisions in something like real time, and adjusting them accordingly. In April, Kundra explained the concept in a Senate subcommittee hearing, comparing the government to a precision-guided missile: "One of the reasons those missiles actually hit their targets is because you get a constant feedback, a loop-back mechanism that lets you know how you are performing in relation to where you are," he told the panel.

Kundra's efforts to put these ambitions into practice, however, have thus far mostly thrown into sharp relief just how far the federal government has to go to meet them. Recovery.gov, the stimulus-money-tracking Web site that Kundra helped conceive as a member of Obama's transition team, was supposed to herald a new era in accountability. Instead, its attempts to track the biggest burst of government spending in history have been slow moving and incomplete, and hamstrung by classic Government 1.0 problems. Some agencies have been reluctant to cooperate, and the fact that the federal government doesn't keep tabs on states' spending on things like education and highway improvements means that it simply doesn't have much of the information it needs to make the site useful. "You end up with an almost intractable problem once those dollars leave the Beltway," says Eric Gillespie, senior vice president of the Seattle-based data research firm Onvia, which employs a staff of hundreds to pore over local government records and newspaper notices for that kind of information. "If you're counting on some sort of persistent or permanent source of data, it just doesn't exist." (To prove this point, Onvia has launched a site called Recovery.org, which uses its own store of hard-won data to provide a lot of the information Recovery.gov has promised but failed to deliver.)

The initial launch of Data.gov, Kundra's bigger bid for bureaucratic transformation, in May was similarly underwhelming. When the site debuted, it featured forty-seven data feeds. But they included very little of the data that anyone interested in transparency would really want—half of the feeds were from the U.S. Geological Survey. "The top data source is on the world's copper smelters," says the Sunlight Foundation's Johnson, "which isn't going to tell us very much about what's going on inside of our government." Once again, as if to prove Kundra's point that citizens are often more inventive with data than governments, when the official site debuted it fell short of a similar amateur site, USAGovXML.com, a government data catalog that a programmer in New Jersey named Robert Loftin built in his spare time by e-mailing and calling government agencies one by one and asking for data feeds. (Data.gov has since expanded its offerings modestly, and when this issue went to press Kundra's office was expecting to add significantly more resources to the site in coming weeks.)

While open government advocates and data geeks are critical of the performance of these projects so far, they give Kundra's goals almost universally high marks. "I think what they're trying to do is quite admirable," Loftin says. "Unless you're a fan of waste, fraud, and abuse, it's absolutely the right thing to do," Gillespie says. And these efforts tend to have rocky rollouts, for the simply reason that you often don't realize what information you're missing until you start asking for it. In 1986, after a pair of high-profile fatal chemical plant mishaps in India and the United States, Congress ordered the Environmental Protection Agency to create a database that kept track of toxic chemicals emitted by heavy industrial operations in the U.S. Chemical companies predictably balked, and at first the data were shoddy and full of holes. But as the system expanded over time, so did the quality of the companies' monitoring. In the end, the database became valuable to industry itself—companies could see how they stacked up against their competitors, and promote their efficiency—and spawned innovations in pollution control. "It was a mobilization by the public that led to better data," Mechling says. "A little bit of data leads to better data, and then you're onto a positive spiral."

In other words, the government and its citizens have to learn—as the Obama campaign did—to see information technology less as a service to be provided, someone who fixes BlackBerries and fine-tunes spam filters, and more as a process, a sort of techno-civic game of Marco Polo. "Look at the Gallup polls—the number of people who believe the government is doing the right thing most of the time has historically fallen from about 70 percent to about 15 percent," Mechling says. "There has been a huge erosion of trust. The idea that says, 'Government has all this data, let's just make that available, and show them we have nothing to hide,' that's the big thing. [It] is potentially a game changer. The game has yet to be played." WM

The government and its citizens have to learn to see information technology less as a service to be provided, someone who fixes BlackBerries and fine-tunes spam filters, and more as a process, a sort of techno-civic game of Marco Polo.

Charles Homans is an editor of the *Washington Monthly*.

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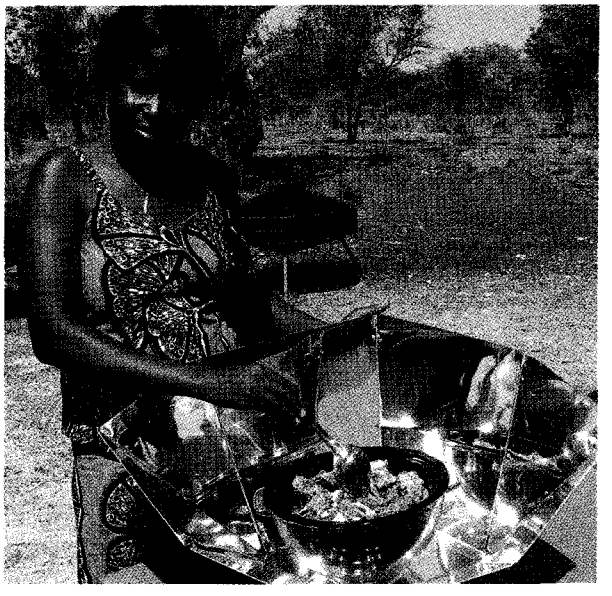

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Code Red

How software companies could screw up Obama's health care reform.

By Phillip Longman

The central contention of Barack Obama's vision for health care reform is straightforward: that our health care system today is so wasteful and poorly organized that it is possible to lower costs, expand access, and raise quality all at the same time—and even have money left over at the end to help pay for other major programs, from bank bailouts to high-speed rail.

It might sound implausible, but the math adds up. America spends nearly twice as much per person as other developed countries for health outcomes that are no better. As White House budget director Peter Orszag has repeatedly pointed out, the cost of health care has become so gigantic that pushing down its growth rate by just 1.5 percentage points per year would free up more than $2 trillion over the next decade.

The White House also has a reasonably accurate fix on what drives these excessive costs: the American health care system is rife with overtreatment. Studies by Dartmouth's Atlas of Health Care project show that as much as thirty cents of every dollar in health care spending goes to drugs and procedures whose efficacy is unproven, and the system contains few incentives for doctors to hew to treatments that have been proven to be effective. The system is also highly fragmented. Three-quarters of Medicare spending goes to patients with five or more chronic conditions who see an annual average of fourteen different physicians, most of whom seldom talk to each other. This fragmentation leads to uncoordinated care, and is one of the reasons why costly and often deadly medical errors occur so frequently.

Almost all experts agree that in order to begin to deal with these problems, the health care industry must step into the twenty-first century and become computerized. Astonishingly, twenty years after the digital revolution, only 1.5 percent of hospitals have integrated IT systems today—and half of those are government hospitals. Digitizing the nation's medical system would not only improve patient safety through better-coordinated care, but would also allow health professionals to practice more scientifically driven medicine, as researchers acquire the ability to mine data from millions of computerized records about what actually works.

It would seem heartening, then, that the stimulus bill President Obama signed in February contains a

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whopping $20 billion to help hospitals buy and implement health IT systems. But the devil, as usual, is in the details. As anybody who's lived through an IT upgrade at the office can attest, it's difficult in the best of circumstances. If it's done wrong, buggy and inadequate software can paralyze an institution.

Consider this tale of two hospitals that have made the digital transition. The first is Midland Memorial Hospital, a 371-bed, three-campus community hospital in southern Texas. Just a few years ago, Midland Memorial, like the overwhelming majority of American hospitals, was totally dependent on paper records. Nurses struggled to decipher doctors' scribbled orders and hunt down patients' charts, which were shuttled from floor to floor in pneumatic tubes and occasionally disappeared into the ether. The professionals involved in patient care had difficulty keeping up with new clinical guidelines and coordinating treatment. In the normal confusion of day-to-day practice, medical errors were a constant danger.

Twenty years after the digital revolution, only an astonishing 1.5 percent of hospitals have integrated information technology systems. Almost all experts agree that in order to begin to deal with the problems of the health care system, this has to change.

This all changed in 2007 when Midland completed the installation of a health IT system. For the first time, all the different doctors involved in a patient's care could work from the same chart, using electronic medical records, which drew data together in one place, ensuring that the information was not lost or garbled. The new system had dramatic effects. For instance, it prompted doctors to follow guidelines for preventing infection when dressing wounds or inserting IVs, which in turn caused infection rates to fall by 88 percent. The number of medical errors and deaths also dropped. David Whiles, director of information services for Midland, reports that the new health IT system was so well designed and easy to use that it took less than two hours for most users to get the hang of it. "Today it's just part of the culture," he says. "It would be impossible to remove it."

Things did not go so smoothly at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, which installed a computerized health system in 2002. Rather than a godsend, the new system turned out to be a disaster, largely because it made it harder for the doctors and nurses to do their jobs in emergency situations. The computer interface, for example, forced doctors to click a mouse ten times to make a simple order. Even when everything worked, a process that once took seconds now took minutes—an enormous difference in an emergency-room environment. The slowdown meant that two doctors were needed to attend to a child in extremis, one to deliver care and the other to work the computer. Nurses also spent less time with patients and more time staring at computer screens. In an emergency, they couldn't just grab a medication from a nearby dispensary as before—now they had to follow the cumbersome protocols demanded by the computer system. According to a study conducted by the hospital and published in the journal *Pediatrics*, mortality rates for one vulnerable patient population—those brought by emergency transport from other facilities—more than doubled, from 2.8 percent before the installation to almost 6.6 percent afterward.

Why did similar attempts to bring health care into the twenty-first century lead to triumph at Midland but tragedy at Children's? While many factors were no doubt at work, among the most crucial was a difference in the software installed by the two institutions. The system that Midland adopted is based on software originally written by doctors for doctors at the Veterans Health Administration, and it is what's called "open source," meaning the code can be read and modified by anyone and is freely available in the public domain rather than copyrighted by a corporation. For nearly thirty years, the VA software's code has been continuously improved by a large and ever-growing community of collaborating, computer-minded health care professionals, at first within the VA and later at medical institutions around the world. Because the program is open source, many minds over the years have had the chance to spot bugs and make improvements. By the time Midland installed it, the core software had been road-tested at hundred of different hospitals, clinics, and nursing homes by hundreds of thousands of health care professionals.

The software Children's Hospital installed, by contrast, was the product of a private company called Cerner Corporation. It was designed by software engineers using locked, proprietary code that medical professionals were barred from seeing, let alone modifying. Unless they could persuade the vendor to do the work, they could no more adjust it than a Microsoft Office user can fine-tune Microsoft Word. While a few large institutions have managed to make meaningful use of proprietary programs, these systems have just as often led to gigantic cost overruns and

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sometimes life-threatening failures. Among the most notorious examples is Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, in Los Angeles, which in 2003 tore out a "state-of-the-art" $34 million proprietary system after doctors rebelled and refused to use it. And because proprietary systems aren't necessarily able to work with similar systems designed by other companies, the software has also slowed what should be one of the great benefits of digitized medicine: the development of a truly integrated digital infrastructure allowing doctors to coordinate patient care across institutions and supply researchers with vast pools of data, which they could use to study outcomes and develop better protocols.

Unfortunately, the way things are headed, our nation's health care system will look a lot more like Children's and Cedars-Sinai than Midland. In the haste of Obama's first 100 days, the administration and Congress crafted the stimulus bill in a way that disadvantages open-source vendors, who are upstarts in the commercial market. At the same time, it favors the larger, more established proprietary vendors, who lobbied to get the $20 billion in the bill. As a result, the government's investment in health IT is unlikely to deliver the quality and cost benefits the Obama administration hopes for, and is quite likely to infuriate the medical community. Frustrated doctors will give their patients an earful about how the crashing taxpayer-financed software they are forced to use wastes money, causes two-hour waits for eight-minute appointments, and constrains treatment options.

Done right, digitized health care could help save the nation from insolvency while improving and extending millions of lives at the same time. Done wrong, it could reconfirm Americans' deepest suspicions of government and set back the cause of health care reform for yet another generation.

Open-source software has no universally recognized definition. But in general, the term means that the code is not secret, can be utilized or modified by anyone, and is usually developed collaboratively by the software's users, not unlike the way Wikipedia entries are written and continuously edited by readers. Once the province of geeky software aficionados, open-source software is quickly becoming mainstream. Windows has an increasingly popular open-source competitor in the Linux operating system. A free program called Apache now dominates the market for Internet servers. The trend is so powerful that IBM has abandoned its propriety software business model entirely, and now gives its programs away for free while offering support, maintenance, and customization of open-source programs, increasingly including many with health care applications. Apple now shares enough of its code that we see an explosion of homemade "applets" for the iPhone—each of which makes the iPhone more useful to more people, increasing Apple's base of potential customers.

If this is the future of computing as a whole, why should U.S. health IT be an exception? Indeed, given the scientific and ethical complexities of medicine, it is hard to think of any other realm where a commitment to transparency and collaboration in information technology is more appropriate. And, in fact, the largest and most successful example of digital medicine is an open-source program called VistA, the one Midland chose.

VistA was born in the 1970s out of an underground movement within the Veterans Health Administration known as the "Hard Hats." The group was made up of VA doctors, nurses, and administrators around the country who had become frustrated with the combination of heavy caseloads and poor record keeping at the institution. Some of them figured that then-new personal and mini computers could be the solution. The VA doctors pioneered the nation's first functioning electronic medical record system, and began collaborating with computer programmers to develop other health IT applications, such as systems that gave doctors online advice in making diagnoses and settling on treatments.

Done right, digitized health care could help save the nation from insolvency while improving and extending millions of lives at the same time. Done wrong, it could reconfirm Americans' deepest suspicions of government and set back the cause of health care reform for yet another generation.

The key advantages of this collaborative approach were both technical and personal. For one, it allowed medical professionals to innovate and learn from each other in tailoring programs to meet their own needs. And by involving medical professionals in the development and application of information technology, it achieved widespread buy-in of digitized medicine at the VA, which has often proven to be a big problem when propriety systems are imposed on doctors elsewhere.

This open approach allowed almost anyone with a good idea at the VA to innovate. In 1992, Sue Kinnick, a nurse at the Topeka, Kansas, VA hospital, was returning

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a rental car and saw the use of a bar-code scanner for the first time. An agent used a wand to scan her car and her rental agreement, and then quickly sent her on her way. A light went off in Kinnick's head. "If they can do this with cars, we can do this with medicine," she later told an interviewer. With the help of other tech-savvy VA employees, Kinnick wrote software, using the Hard Hat's public domain code, that put the new scanner technology to a new and vital use: preventing errors in dispensing medicine. Under Kinnick's direction, patients and nurses were each given bar-coded wristbands, and all medications were bar-coded as well. Then nurses were given wands, which they used to scan themselves, the patient, and the medication bottle before dispensing drugs. This helped prevent four of the most common dispensing errors: wrong med, wrong dose, wrong time, and wrong patient. The system, which has been adopted by all veterans hospitals and clinics and continuously improved by users, has cut the number of dispensing errors in half at some facilities and saved thousands of lives.

Thanks to the stimulus bill, $20 billion is about to be poured into buggy, expensive, proprietary software that will not bring the benefits the Obama administration hopes for. Rather, it will amount to a giant bailout of a health IT industry whose business model has never really worked.

At first, the efforts of enterprising open-source innovators like Kinnick brought specific benefits to the VA system, such as fewer medical errors and reduced patient wait times through better scheduling. It also allowed doctors to see more patients, since they were spending less time chasing down paper records. But eventually, the open-source technology changed the way VA doctors practiced medicine in bigger ways. By mining the VA's huge resource of digitized medical records, researchers could look back at which drugs, devices, and procedures were working and which were not. This was a huge leap forward in a profession where there is still a stunning lack of research data about the effectiveness of even the most common medical procedures. Using VistA to examine 12,000 medical records, VA researchers were able to see how diabetics were treated by different VA doctors, and by different VA hospitals and clinics, and how they fared under the different circumstances. Those findings could in turn be communicated back to doctors in clinical guidelines delivered by the VistA system. In the 1990s, the VA began using the same information technology to see which surgical teams or hospital managers were underperforming, and which deserved rewards for exceeding benchmarks of quality and safety.

Thanks to all this effective use of information technology, the VA emerged in this decade as the bright star of the American health system in the eyes of most health-quality experts. True, one still reads stories in the papers about breakdowns in care at some VA hospitals. That is evidence that the VA is far from perfect—but also that its information system is good at spotting problems. Whatever its weaknesses, the VA has been shown in study after study to be providing the highest-quality medical care in America by such metrics as patient safety, patient satisfaction, and the observance of proven clinical protocols, even while reducing the cost per patient.

Following the organization's success, a growing number of other government-run hospitals and clinics have started adapting VistA to their own uses. This includes public hospitals in Hawaii and West Virginia, as well as all the hospitals run by the Indian Health Service. The VA's evolving code also has been adapted by providers in many other countries, including Germany, Finland, Malaysia, Brazil, India, and, most recently, Jordan. To date, more than eighty-five countries have sent delegations to study how the VA uses the program, with four to five more coming every week.

Proprietary systems, by contrast, have gotten a cool reception. Although health IT companies have been trying to convince hospitals and clinics to buy their integrated patient-record software for more than fifteen years, only a tiny fraction have installed such systems. Part of the problem is our screwed-up insurance reimbursement system, which essentially rewards health care providers for performing more and more expensive procedures rather than improving patients' welfare. This leaves few institutions that are not government run with much of a business case for investing in health IT; using digitized records to keep patients healthier over the long term doesn't help the bottom line.

But another big part of the problem is that proprietary systems have earned a bad reputation in the medical community for the simple reason that they often don't work very well. The programs are written by software developers who are far removed from the realities of practicing medicine. The result is systems which tend to create, rather than prevent, medical errors once they're in the hands of harried health care professionals. The Joint

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Commission, which accredits hospitals for safety, recently issued an unprecedented warning that computer technology is now implicated in an incredible 25 percent of all reported medication errors. Perversely, license agreements usually bar users of proprietary health IT systems from reporting dangerous bugs to other health care facilities. In open-source systems, users learn from each other's mistakes; in proprietary ones, they're not even allowed to mention them.

If proprietary health IT systems are widely adopted, even more drawbacks will come sharply into focus. The greatest benefits of health IT—and ones the Obama administration is counting on—come from the opportunities that are created when different hospitals and clinics are able to share records and stores of data with each other. Hospitals within the digitized VA system are able to deliver more services for less mostly because their digital records allow doctors and clinics to better coordinate complex treatment regimens. Electronic medical records also produce a large collection of digitized data that can be easily mined by managers and researchers (without their having access to the patients' identities, which are privacy protected) to discover what drugs, procedures, and devices work and which are ineffective or even dangerous. For example, the first red flags about Vioxx, an arthritis medication that is now known to cause heart attacks, were raised by the VA and large private HMOs, which unearthed the link by mining their electronic records. Similarly, the IT system at the Mayo Clinic (an open-source one, incidentally) allows doctors to personalize care by mining records of specific patient populations. A doctor treating a patient for cancer, for instance, can query the treatment outcomes of hundreds of other patients who had tumors in the same area and were of similar age and family backgrounds, increasing odds that they choose the most effective therapy.

But in order for data mining to work, the data has to offer a complete picture of the care patients have gotten from all the various specialists involved in their treatment over a period of time. Otherwise it's difficult to identify meaningful patterns or sort out confounding factors. With proprietary systems, the data is locked away in what programmers call "black boxes," and cannot be shared across hospitals and clinics. (This is partly by design; it's difficult for doctors to switch IT providers if they can't extract patient data.) Unless patients get all their care in one facility or system, the result is a patchwork of digital records that are of little or no use to researchers. Significantly, since proprietary systems can't speak to each other, they also offer few advantages over paper records when it comes to coordinating care across facilities. Patients might as well be schlepping around file folders full of handwritten charts.

Of course, not all proprietary systems are equally bad. A program offered by Epic Systems Corporation of Wisconsin rivals VistA in terms of features and functionality. When it comes to cost, however, open source wins hands down, thanks to no or low licensing costs. According to Dr. Scott Shreeve, who is involved in the VistA installations in West Virginia and elsewhere, installing a proprietary system like Epic costs ten times as much as VistA and takes at least three times as long—and that's if everything goes smoothly, which is often not the case. In 2004, Sutter Health committed $154 million to implementing electronic medical records in all the twenty-seven hospitals it operated in Northern California using Epic software. The project was supposed to be finished by 2006, but things didn't work out as planned. Sutter pulled the plug on the project in May of this year, having completed only one installation and facing remaining cost estimates of $1 billion for finishing the project. In a letter to employees, Sutter executives explained that they could no long afford to fund employee pensions and also continue with the Epic buildout.

The VA's open-source software allowed a nurse in Topeka, Kansas, to adapt for her own work a bar-code scanner she saw used at a rental-car agency. Her innovation cut the number of medication-dispensing errors in half at some facilities, and saved thousands of lives.

Unfortunately, billions of taxpayers' dollars are about to be poured into expensive, inadequate proprietary software, thanks to a provision in the stimulus package. The bill offers medical facilities as much as $64,000 per physician if they make "meaningful use" of "certified" health IT in the next year and a half, and punishes them with cuts to their Medicare reimbursements if they don't do so by 2015. Obviously, doctors and health administrators are under pressure to act soon. But what is the meaning of "meaningful use"? And who determines which products qualify? These questions are currently the subject of bitter political wrangling.

Vendors of proprietary health IT have a powerful lobby, headed by the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society, a group with deep ties to the Obama administration. (The chairman of HIMSS, Black-

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ford Middleton, is an adviser to Obama's health care team and was instrumental in getting money for health IT into the stimulus bill.) The group is not openly against open source, but last year when Rep. Pete Stark of California introduced a bill to create a low-cost, open-source health IT system for all medical providers through the Department of Health and Human Services, HIMSS used its influence to smash the legislation. The group is now deploying its lobbying clout to persuade regulators to define "meaningful use" so that only software approved by an allied group, the Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology, qualifies. Not only are CCHIT's standards notoriously lax, the group is also largely funded and staffed by the very industry whose products it is supposed to certify. Giving it the authority over the field of health IT is like letting a group controlled by Big Pharma determine which drugs are safe for the market.

While a few large institutions have managed to make meaningful use of proprietary health IT, these systems have just as often been expensive failures. In 2003, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles tore out a "state-of-the-art" $34 million proprietary system after doctors rebelled and refused to use it.

Even if the proprietary health IT lobby loses the battle to make CCHIT the official standard, the promise of open-source health IT is still in jeopardy. One big reason is the far greater marketing power that the big, established proprietary venders can bring to bear compared to their open-source counterparts, who are smaller and newer on the scene. A group of proprietary industry heavyweights, including Microsoft, Intel, Cisco, and Allscripts, is sponsoring the Electronic Health Record Stimulus Tour, which sends teams of traveling sales representatives to tell local doctors how they can receive tens of thousands of dollars in stimulus money by buying their products—provided that they "act now." For those medical professionals who can't make the show personally, helpful webcasts are available. The tour is a variation on a tried-and-true strategy: when physicians are presented with samples of pricey new name-brand substitutes for equally good generic drugs, time and again they start prescribing the more expensive medicine. And they are likely to be even more suggestible when it comes to software because most don't know enough about computing to evaluate vendors' claims skeptically.

What can be done to counter this marketing offensive and keep proprietary companies from locking up the health care IT market? The best and simplest answer is to take the stimulus money off the table, at least for the time being. Rather than shoveling $20 billion into software that doesn't deliver on the promise of digital medicine, the government should put a hold on that money pending the results of a federal interagency study that will be looking into the potential of open-source health IT and will deliver its findings by October 2010.

As it happens, that study is also part of the stimulus bill. The language for it was inserted by West Virginia Senator Jay Rockefeller, who has also introduced legislation that would help put open-source health IT on equal footing with the likes of Allscripts and Microsoft. Building on the systems developed by the VA and Indian Health Services, Rockefeller's bill would create an open-source government-sponsored "public utility" that would distribute VistA-like software, along with grants to pay for installation and maintenance. The agency would also be charged with developing quality standards for open-source health IT and guidelines for interoperability. This would give us the low-cost, high-quality, fully integrated and proven health IT infrastructure we need in order to have any hope of getting truly better health care.

Delaying the spending of that $20 billion would undoubtedly infuriate makers of proprietary health software. But it would be welcomed by health care providers who have long resisted—partly for good reason—buying that industry's product. Pushing them to do so quickly via the stimulus bill amounts to a giant taxpayer bailout of health IT companies whose business model has never really worked. That wouldn't just be a horrendous waste of public funds; it would also lock the health care industry into software that doesn't do the job and would be even more expensive to get rid of later.

As the administration and Congress struggle to pass a health care reform bill, questions about which software is best may seem relatively unimportant—the kind of thing you let the "tech guys" figure out. But the truth is that this bit of fine print will determine the success or failure of the whole health care reform enterprise. So it's worth taking the time to get the details right. WM

Phillip Longman is a senior fellow at the New America Foundation and the author of *Best Care Anywhere: Why VA Health Care Is Better Than Yours* as well as *The Next Progressive Era: A Blueprint for Broad Prosperity.*

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A CLEAR CUT CRISIS

Tropical deforestation contributes more to global warming than all the vehicles on earth. Does the world have a plan to deal with it?

A SPECIAL REPORT

Washington MONTHLY

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This special report was made possible in part by the generous support of the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation.

Guest editor: Roger Stone
Editors: Mariah Blake, Paul Glastris, Charles Homans
Publisher: Diane Straus Tucker
Cover photo: Daniel Beltra

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INTRODUCTION: CHANGE IN THE AIR

Past efforts to save tropical forests have largely failed. The world community, prompted by rising concerns about climate change, is finally considering a solution that might work.

By Roger D. Stone

It is a well-known fact that China and the United States are the two most prolific emitters of carbon into the atmosphere, and hence the world's biggest contributors to global warming. Less well known, and perhaps more surprising, is the country that ranks third on the list: Indonesia. The Southeast Asian archipelago nation has earned this dubious distinction nowhere nearly so much from industrialization as from deforestation. Since 1950, when the country was down near the bottom of the list, Indonesia has lost a staggering 40 percent of its tropical forests to logging, agriculture, and other commercial ventures. Deforestation there continues to accelerate.

We tend to think of climate change as just a matter of what comes out of smokestacks and tailpipes—an energy issue. In fact, according to the World Resources Institute's careful tabulations, tropical deforestation accounts for 20 percent or more of all carbon emissions into the atmosphere. That, says the World Wildlife Fund, is "more than the combined emissions of every car, truck, ship, plane or train on the planet." The reason is not hard to understand. Plants remove carbon, in the form of carbon dioxide, from the atmosphere and turn it, via photosynthesis, into organic matter: leaves, bark, roots, and so on. This "fixing" process is most intense in dense tropical forests, which cover only 7 percent of the earth's dry land but store (in the plants themselves and in the rich soils below) about 45 percent of all terrestrial carbon. Chopping down the rainforests removes this carbon-absorbing buffer while releasing vast amounts of stored carbon into the air as the brush is burned off.

The alarming role that deforestation plays in climate change, and what might be done about it, is the subject of this special report. In particular, the report addresses the quest for financial systems in which the owners and residents of tropical forest properties can make more money from the standing forest than from its removal, which may be our best hope for reining in deforestation and its contribution to climate change. The term of art for this concept is REDD—Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation. REDD encompasses a variety of ways in which substantial funds to protect tropical forests and stimulate sustainable development might be generated, either through carbon market mechanisms or direct payments from public and private sources.

The REDD concept is gaining traction among environmentalists, scientists, and in the halls of power. In fact, the key climate change legislation now in play in Congress, the Waxman-Markey bill, contains language that would bring tropical forest conservation into a proposed national cap-and-trade system. In effect, the legislation would allow U.S. companies to "offset" the carbon they emit by paying

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tropical countries and their citizens not to cut down their rainforests. A market-based system that includes REDD is also expected to be prominently on the agenda at UN-sponsored talks in Copenhagen this December, where representatives hope to hash out a new climate change treaty to replace the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012.

There are many strong arguments, in addition to carbon sequestration, for protecting the world's tropical forests, and scientists and environmentalists have been making them for years. The trees act as anchors, inhibiting erosion. They do much to regulate local and regional climates by collecting, storing, and then releasing ample quantities of water. Clouds form, and rain ensues; when there are fewer trees, there is less rain and the region is drier and warmer. Germ plasm from wild plants protects many common food plants from disease and viruses. The remarkable biodiversity within tropical forests—the greatest anywhere—includes millions of plant and animal species we have not even discovered, let alone examined for their prospective contributions to human well-being.

Using such arguments, many conservationists of the late twentieth century tried to save the tropical forests by walling them off from human use. International organizations gave park rangers boots and rifles. Attempts were made to control logging by certifying hardwoods and other forest products as having been sustainably harvested, and to restore lands degraded as deforestation spread and "agricultural frontiers" advanced. Ecotourism ventures dependent on forest preservation were launched. The worlds of international conservation and development assistance crackled with talk of tropical forest action plans, integrated conservation and development projects, extractive reserves, and restoring the rights and management responsibilities of indigenous people dependent on forests for food and medicine. Top-down partnerships were formed between ranchers, conservationists, governments, and aid donors, with beleaguered forest dwellers occasionally making their way to the big table.

As human pressures mounted on lightly populated lands, such initiatives have met with only partial success. Ultimately they have failed to stem the tide of ongoing tropical forest loss, which roars on at the rate of one acre a second. For every Costa Rica, a plucky little country whose economic strength rests largely on a pedestal of careful land use, there is a larger-scale counterexample such as Indonesia where blatant connivance between illegal loggers and government officials stripped many forests and where oil palm plantations are now carving ever deeper into forest lands. At current rates, the world will lose about 70 percent of all remaining forests—almost all of this in tropical developing countries—within the next 200 years.

The old remedies have failed to slow deforestation because they have not sufficiently altered the basic economic fact that there is often more money to be made in cutting rainforests down than in leaving them standing. The appeal of REDD is that it can fundamentally change that equation. The idea has its roots back in the 1980s, when environmentalists began persuading Western banks to write off some Latin American debt in return for those countries agreeing to preserve tracts of rainforest, in what became known as debt-for-nature swaps. It evolved in the 1990s, when the Clinton administration created tax incentives for U.S. power companies to invest in tropical forest conservation projects in return for "carbon credits" that could be traded on the open market—an early, voluntary test of the kind of REDD mechanism that the Waxman-Markey bill would make mandatory.

These nascent efforts showed promise. But when United Nations negotiators met in 1997 to craft the Kyoto Protocol, they pointedly excluded deforestation from the carbon-trading scheme that was established there. Diplomats worried, not without reason, that measurement and monitoring would be extremely difficult. Environmentalists protested that the system would make it easy for polluters to avoid cutting back their emissions, by allowing them to use forest-based credits as offsets.

We tend to think of climate change as a matter of smokestacks and tailpipes. But tropical deforestation accounts for at least a fifth of all carbon emissions.

In the twelve years since Kyoto, opinions have changed—a shift Rhett Butler describes in his centerpiece article on REDD ("Big REDD," page A6). The growing threat of climate change and the failure of other methods to stem deforestation have turned environmental groups like the World Wildlife Fund from opponents of market-based REDD initiatives into advocates. Also, improvements in procedures and new technologies like GPS systems have given scientists and diplomats more confidence that a complex carbon-offset market for tropical forests can be successfully monitored and enforced.

For all this progress, there is no guarantee that negotiators in Copenhagen this December will agree on the terms of a REDD-type forest conservation initiative—or indeed on anything at all. As David Adam notes ("From Kyoto to Copenhagen," page A12), the politics going into the negotiations are treacherous, many technical complexi-

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Oil palm plantations cut into the forest in the Jengka Triangle Region, Malaysia.

ties with the REDD idea remain unresolved, and the chances that final negotiations will be pushed off beyond this year are growing. Reflecting continuing skepticism in some quarters about REDD, Marcelo Leite ("The Brazilian Dilemma," page A15) describes an alternative approach now under way in Brazil: a government-sponsored fund that receives grants from overseas and distributes them itself, thus avoiding sovereignty concerns and the uncertainties surrounding market-based financing mechanisms.

As if carving out a long-term climate change regime that encompasses deforestation weren't challenging enough, there is also a desperate need to find ways to adjudicate conflicting pressures over land use so our food and fuel needs can be met without invading ever deeper into the tropical forests. In these pages, Mark Rice-Oxley reports on the search for more forest-friendly "second generation" biofuels ("Algae Soup," page A17), while Michael Grunwald ("The Case for Big Ag," page A20) makes the case for why industrial-style agriculture, stripped of its least sustainable qualities, might actually benefit the developing world and its forests.

All of these new treaties, technologies, and methods will take time to perfect and put in place. Yet, as Paul Brown explains ("The Long Hot Summer," page A5), time is not on our side. New scientific research shows that global warming could devastate our forests, causing the vegetation to dry up and gradually die off. As a result, these rich ecosystems would stop absorbing vast quantities of carbon and begin to release billions of tons instead. This, in turn, would accelerate global warming, causing the forests to die off faster—a vicious cycle with devastating consequences for the planet.

Put another way, our forests, whose capacity to sequester carbon has made them our greatest ally in the battle against climate change, could become one of our greatest liabilities. Whether this happens depends entirely on the choices we make now. WM

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THE LONG HOT SUMMER

Researchers are starting to make sense of a severe drought that ravaged the Amazon rainforest four years ago. Their findings are terrifying.

By Paul Brown

In the summer of 2005, the Amazon rainforest suffered the worst drought it had seen in a century. Whole tributaries of the Amazon River dried up, leaving ferries stranded on dried-up mud and hundreds of thousands of dead fish in stagnant pools, robbing local people of their main source of protein. Local farmers, their river routes too parched to transport goods, watched their crops rot on the docks. So dire was the situation that in October of that year, the governor of the Brazilian state of Amazonas, in the heart of the rainforest, declared the situation a "public calamity."

But for one group of people—scientists—the crisis provided an opportunity. Although the Amazon is vital to the future health of the climate, and therefore mankind, it remains a region of unanswered scientific questions, and the drought was a chance to pry loose some of its secrets. No one was better positioned to do this than Oliver Phillips, a professor of geography at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom. Working with sixty-five collaborators, many of them from Amazonian countries, Phillips has spent a quarter century studying how the world's largest forest reacts to changing weather patterns, a project that entails monitoring 136 sites in forty-four distinct ecosystems and collecting heaps of data on everything from tree diameter to wood density and species mix. This means he was able to bring rigorous scientific analysis to bear on a crucial question that had previously been relegated to the realm of informed speculation: How does the rainforest respond to extreme drought?

Phillips's findings, which were published earlier this year in the journal *Science*, are sobering. The world's forests are an enormous carbon sink, meaning they absorb massive quantities of carbon dioxide, through the processes of photosynthesis and respiration. In normal years the Amazon alone absorbs three billion tons of carbon, more than twice the quantity human beings produce by burning fossil fuels. But during the 2005 drought, this process was reversed, and the Amazon gave off two billion tons of carbon instead, creating an additional five billion tons of heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere. That's more than the total annual emissions of Europe and Japan combined.

Climate change could trigger the worst kind of vicious cycle, with climbing temperatures causing rainforests to dry out and give off more greenhouse gases.

The drought was not evenly spread across the vast expanses of the Amazon, but in the worst affected areas there was severe dieback. Some trees stopped growing, others lost their leaves, and many of the fastest-growing trees and creepers died altogether. Perhaps more surprising, comparing exact measurements of tree diameter, wood density, and biomass against measurements taken in earlier years, Phillips and his colleagues found that even in places that seemed to emerge relatively unscathed—where the forest looked no different to the naked eye—there had been a loss of biomass. Rainforests, it seems, are more sensitive to drought than was previously understood.

Significantly, Phillips also found that the 2005 drought was not the result of El Niño, the cause of previous smaller episodes, but of a regional rise in sea temperatures—one of the expected early signs of global warming. Taken together, these findings suggest that climate change could trigger the worst kind of vicious cycle, with climbing temperatures causing the rainforests to dry out and give off massive quantities of greenhouse gases, which in turn causes the planet to warm more rapidly—a dynamic with harrowing implications. An article last year in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* identified rainforest-wide dieback in the Amazon, along with the melting of the Arctic sea ice, as among the nine most crucial "tipping points" that must be staved off to prevent catastrophic climate change.

As if that's not enough bad news, new research presented in March at a conference organized by the University of Copenhagen, with the support of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, says that as much as 85 percent of the Amazon forests will be lost if the temperature in the region increases by just 7.2 degrees Fahrenheit. To keep from hitting that mark, we will have to curb global carbon emissions by at least 80 percent. At the same meeting, Vicky Pope, a researcher from Britain's Met Office (a gov-

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ernment agency that tracks climate and weather data) showed that a temperature increase of 2.2 degrees above current levels would trigger a 20 to 40 percent Amazon die-off within 100 years. A rise of 5.4 degrees would kill 75 percent of the trees. "The forest as we know it would effectively be gone," she says. Other Met researchers have found that the loss of the forest would be irreversible.

Nor is the Amazon the only forest at risk. In African countries like Congo, where Phillips is conducting research with African scientists, forests "also suffer from attack around the fringes," he says. "Parts are so dry they are in danger of degenerating into savannah."

The good news, Phillips says, is that much of the damage has yet to be done. "About four-fifths of Amazonia is still mature forest," he explains. "It is the biggest wilderness left on the planet. There is a lot to fight for; there is a lot to save. I am not disheartened." But if his and others' predictions are reliable—and the careful measurement of the 2005 Amazon drought certainly lends them some credence—there is a real risk of drought accelerating climate change to a point where it would be beyond our ability to control it. All the more reason, then, to take action now to prevent that from happening. WM

A riverboat beached on the bank of a river dried out by drought in Barrelrinha, Brazil.

Daniel Beltra

Paul Brown is the author of eight environment books and the former environment correspondent of the *Guardian*.

BIG REDD

Right now, there's more money to be made cutting tropical forests down than leaving them standing. Environmental policymakers are trying to reverse that equation.

By Rhett Butler

Until forty years ago, the Surui people spent their days roaming the Brazilian Amazon with bows and arrows, hunting monkeys and wild pigs. Their only contact with the outside world were the rubber tappers who occasionally ventured through their territory. Then, beginning in the late 1960s, the Brazilian government laid a 2,000-mile highway through the heart of the jungle. Lured by the promise of cheap, fertile land, thousands of poor farmers boarded buses, rickety pickups, and horse-drawn wagons and bore deep into Surui tribal lands. The results were catastrophic. First the tribe was decimated by disease. Then unscrupulous speculators started hawking fraudulent titles to the land, spawning bloody turf wars between the tribe and settlers. Within a few years, the Surui population dwindled from roughly 2,000 to fewer than 200.

Amid the onslaught, neighboring tribes scattered, died off, or sold out to loggers and ranchers. But the bitter suffering and long odds only seemed to sharpen the Suruis' resolve and fighting instincts. After ten years of struggle, in 1982, the tribe rose up, armed with clubs and poison arrows, and drove the settlers from their land.

Since then, the Surui have been battling to keep new incursions at bay. The tribe has split into four groups, each living in a different corner of their 600,000-acre territory, so they can better guard their turf. They regularly throw chains over logging roads, chase miners out of pits and rivers, and take the government to task for failing to rein in the destruction. So far, their tenacity has paid off: even as development has eaten away at the surrounding landscape, the tribe has managed to preserve their forests and their way of life. Viewed by satellite, their territory is a lone patch of green amid stretches of barren, ocher earth. But the struggle is relentless. In the last decade, the Surui and neighboring tribes have seen eleven tribal elders assassinated. At one point their chief, Almir Surui, was evacuated by helicopter to the United States because of threats to his life.

Behind the brutality is simple economics: in rural Brazil, grinding poverty is the norm, and there is ample money to be made from plundering the forests. Logging alone supports at least thirty timber mills and more than 4,000 jobs in the areas surrounding the Surui territory. This means that, for every trespasser the tribe fends off, thousands more lie in wait. Despite the admonitions of tribal elders, even some members of the Surui tribe have given in and opened their land to loggers in return for cash.

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Almir Surui is well aware that, given the forces he's up against, poison arrows won't be enough to keep intruders at bay forever. In recent years, the plucky young chief, who wears a traditional feather headdress even when visiting Washington or Rio de Janeiro, has embraced a variety of new tools that would have boggled the minds of his ancestors. The one-room schoolhouse in his village has been outfitted with broadband Internet and computer terminals that run a high-resolution version of Google Earth, which the Surui use to monitor illegal logging. Working with environmental groups, including Forest Trends and the Amazon Conservation Team, the tribe is also exploring ways to tap into global carbon markets. As a first step, they have hired the heavyweight law firm Baker and McKenzie to parse their claim to the carbon dioxide stored in their part of the Amazon, which, like all tropical forests, absorbs large quantities of this heat-trapping gas. They have also begun laying out methods for measuring the carbon stock, most likely through a combination of high-resolution satellites and on-the-ground observation. In the meantime, an anthropologist has been dispatched to explain to the tribe's rank-and-file what exactly carbon is.

The aim is to get businesses and governments in the developed world to pay the Surui to preserve their forest as part of the global effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The money would go toward a rigorous, independently certified monitoring and enforcement system, as well as toward building schools and health clinics and reforesting the areas of their land that have been ravaged by loggers. The Surui also plan to use some of the funds to set up sustainable industries, such as shade-grown-coffee plantations and small-scale furniture factories, which would allow them—and, eventually, the surrounding communities—to make a living from standing forests, thereby helping to alleviate the poverty that has fed constant assaults on their territory.

The project is part of a bold experiment, called Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, which is being piloted in countries around the globe. Though REDD can take many forms, the key idea is that businesses or governments in wealthy countries compensate those in the developing world for preserving their forests, either by paying into a fund or by purchasing credits on carbon markets. Though the concept is not entirely new, it is rapidly gaining traction as the international community comes to grips with the crucial role forests play in regulating greenhouse gases. Not only do our forests absorb and store vast quantities of carbon dioxide in their vegetation through photosynthesis; when they're destroyed, they also release the gas into the atmosphere. Roughly one-fifth of the world's carbon emissions stems from deforestation and forest degradation. Scientists warn that without measures to keep forests intact, we will stand no chance of avoiding catastrophic climate change.

In rural Brazil, it comes down to simple economics: grinding poverty is the norm, and there is ample money to be made from plundering the forests.

REDD is expected to play a key role in the new global climate treaty to take effect after the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. Similarly, the landmark Waxman-Markey cap-and-trade bill, which as of this writing is moving through Congress, would allow polluters to offset a portion of their emissions by sinking money into REDD projects. Although support for these proposals is growing in many quarters, they remain deeply controversial. Backers say they could deliver the same benefits as cutting emissions from tailpipes and smokestacks while improving the lives of poor rural people and protecting vital ecosystems and watersheds. Critics counter that the policy will be costly and complicated to monitor and could undermine the transparency, simplicity, and predictability of carbon markets, dealing a critical blow to the global battle against climate change.

The idea of protecting tropical forests as a way of mitigating climate change is by no means new. During negotiations over the Kyoto Protocol, President Bill Clinton established a system of incentives, including grants and tax credits, to encourage U.S. businesses to voluntarily reduce their carbon output before mandatory caps were set. Polluters could also get credit for "offsetting" emissions by investing in projects to prevent deforestation, with the result that U.S. power companies poured millions of dollars into protecting at-risk forests in Latin America. For instance, the Noel Kempff Mercado National Park, a preserve of nearly four million acres in the Bolivian Amazon, was established in 1997 using $11 million from U.S. energy companies, such as American Electric Power and BP Amoco. The project is administered by the Bolivian government and environmental groups, including the Nature Conservancy, which uses tree counters and satellite data to keep tabs on the health of the forest. So far, it has been a success. Even as logging and agriculture have eaten away at forests elsewhere in Latin America, including those that are nominally protected, Noel Kempff's ecosystem has remained pristine. It is estimated that more than twenty-five million tons of carbon dioxide emissions will be avoided as a result of the project.

But these types of forestry projects were relegated to the sidelines with the signing of the Kyoto Protocol, the first and only global climate treaty, in December 1997. Though some signatories supported the idea of allowing developing countries to sell credits from forest-preservation projects on the emerging

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global carbon market, the majority held that large-scale monitoring and verification would be difficult, if not impossible, with existing technical tools. Critics also noted that discrete projects to protect against deforestation couldn't be counted on to reduce overall carbon emissions, since the loggers and ranchers who chop down the forest for their livelihood could shift their activities to nonprotected areas, a phenomenon known as "leakage." Moreover, they argued, there was no way to guarantee that forests set aside as carbon sinks would continue to store heat-trapping gases in the long term, since drought or fire could cause the foliage in protected areas to die back and release stored carbon into the atmosphere.

Perhaps more importantly, many environmental groups believed that credits from forest-preservation projects could swamp the carbon market, driving down the price of carbon and allowing polluting industries to continue emitting greenhouse gases without consequence. The few environmentalists who expressed support for REDD during the Kyoto talks became mired in bitter shouting matches with their peers. "It was a pretty lonely battle," recalls Tia Nelson, a longtime REDD supporter and the daughter of the late Senator Gaylord Nelson, who founded Earth Day.

Ultimately, REDD was excluded from Kyoto, though parties to the agreement could earn carbon offsets by funding reforestation projects (or projects to plant new forests where none existed) in the developing world. However, due to technical stumbling blocks, few of these projects got off the ground. In the absence of meaningful incentives to protect or restore forests, development ate away at these lush ecosystems, including millions of acres of primary forests, which are the richest biologically, the most carbon dense, and the hardest to replace. Nowhere was the devastation more evident than in Brazil and Indonesia, two of the countries with the most extensive tropical forest cover. Between 1997 and 2004, Brazil's deforestation rates increased dramatically, peaking at 10,600 square miles a year, an area the size of Massachusetts. In Indonesia, the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998 ushered in a period of chaos, resulting in unprecedented destruction of forests. Loggers and oil palm plantation developers cleared and burned vast areas, and the damage was worsened by one of the strongest el Niño events on record. When the smoke cleared, more than 25,000 square miles had burned in Indonesian Borneo alone, unleashing upward of two billion tons of carbon. All told, since Kyoto's exclusion, Brazil and Indonesia have lost more than 160,000 square miles of forest—an area nearly the size of California—with the result that billions of tons of carbon have been released into the atmosphere. In fact, due to deforestation these two countries, which have relatively modest industrial emission, rank just right behind the United States and China as the world's top emitters of greenhouse gases.

The concept of REDD is not new, but it is gaining traction as the world comes to grips with the role forests play in regulating greenhouse gases.

Faced with this devastation, scientists and environmental groups began working to solve the technical, political, and ideological woes that have prevented the widespread adoption of REDD. In 2005, six leading Brazilian and American researchers published an essay titled "Tropical Deforestation and the Kyoto Protocol" in the journal *Climatic Change*, which concluded that it would be impossible to curb global warming without protecting forests. The authors proposed solutions to some of the technical problems surrounding REDD. Most critically, they suggested that countries participating in REDD schemes commit to reducing deforestation on a national rather than project level, thus addressing the pressing concern about leakage.

Meanwhile, new guidelines were emerging, among them the Climate, Community, and Biodiversity Standards and Voluntary Carbon Standards, which laid out rules for ensuring that REDD projects delivered on promised carbon reductions. At the same time, tools for monitoring deforestation, such as GPS and computer mapping, were becoming cheaper and more ubiquitous. New technologies were also surfacing, among them applications for analyzing high-resolution satellite data, which could spot small gaps in the rainforest canopy and pinpoint areas where even a handful of trees had been felled by loggers. Similarly, Lidar, a laser-based remote-sensing technology, could penetrate the dense layers of foliage, allowing researchers to create three-dimensional maps. In addition to making it easier to monitor deforestation, these developments simplified the process of estimating how much carbon forests were storing, something that previously required venturing into the woods on foot and measuring the girth of tree trunks and the depth of the leaf litter.

Another crucial development was the emergence of a negotiation bloc, led by Papua New Guinea. At the time, the tiny island nation was under pressure from the international community to quit felling its tropical forests, but its leaders feared that ferreting out the loggers would devastate its already fragile economy. The dilemma caught the attention of a Columbia University MBA student named Kevin Conrad, who had grown up deep in the Papua New Guinea rainforest. He decided to form an organization to push for a mechanism by which developing countries could be compensated for preserving their forests. Called the Coalition of Rainforest Nations, it came to include more than a dozen tropical countries, among them

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Chief Almir Surui of the Surui tribe in the Brazilian Amazon.

Costa Rica, a country lauded by the international community for transforming itself from a high deforester to a model of conservation.

The coalition made its public debut in December 2005 at the United Nations Climate Change Convention in Montreal, where Conrad offered a proposal for including REDD in the post-Kyoto climate treaty, partly as a means of encouraging poor countries to contribute to the global fight against climate change. Previously, developing nations had refused to commit to targets for cutting their greenhouse gas emissions because, they argued, it would stifle economic growth—a fact that had emerged as a key sticking point in past negotiations. According to Conrad, the proposal initially met opposition from the United States, which feared that if developing countries committed to robust and meaningful reductions of heat-trapping gases, the U.S. would no longer be able to cite their lack of participation as an excuse not to take action. But the United States eventually backed down, and, to the surprise of many observers, the parties agreed to study the proposal—a first step toward its inclusion in a future climate accord.

Two years later, representatives from more than 180 nations descended on Bali for another UN climate conference, this one focused on hashing out a road map for negotiating a post-Kyoto climate treaty. When, after twelve days, the parties finally reached an agreement, the United States attempted to block its passage. Conrad issued a direct challenge: "We ask for your leadership, but if for some reason you're not willing to lead, leave it to the rest of us. Please get out of the way." Minutes later the U.S. delegation capitulated, paving the way for the Bali Action Plan, which recognized the critical role tropical forests play in regulating climate and established REDD as a likely component of the post-Kyoto regime. Soon after the meeting, money began pouring into voluntary REDD programs. Norway unveiled its International Climate and Forests Initiative, a plan to commit some $500 million per year to rainforest conservation, while the World Bank announced a $385 million Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) to jumpstart REDD in developing countries, in part by helping them develop the tools and expertise they'll need to administer the program.

More recently, Britain and Norway put $160 million toward the Congo Basin Forest Fund to finance forest conservation activities in Central Africa. Britain's Prince Charles has made saving rainforests his signature cause by developing the Prince's Rainforest Project to bring business and political leaders around to supporting conservation. His efforts culminated in a historic meeting between heads of state, in ad-

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vance of the G20 summit in April 2009, to discuss rainforest conservation. Developing countries have also gotten involved, including Brazil, which in 2008 announced the formation of a $21 billion fund to reduce deforestation in the Amazon by 70 percent within ten years. The project is expected to cut the nation's carbon emissions by 4.8 billion tons by 2017. (For more information, see Marcelo Leite, "The Brazilian Dilemma," page A15.)

Meanwhile, the Waxman-Markey cap-and-trade bill includes a REDD component. Specifically, the measure would allow U.S. companies to offset six billion tons of carbon dioxide emissions by investing in forest conservation projects between now and 2025.

These developments are part of a surge of support for REDD, which extends even to once-skeptical environmental groups, such as the World Wildlife Fund and the Sierra Club, and the growing momentum toward its inclusion in the post-Kyoto climate treaty, the final details of which are meant to be hammered out in Copenhagen this December. Stuart Eizenstat, who led the U.S. delegation in Kyoto, summed up the evolving attitudes of many environmentalists and diplomats in testimony before Congress last year, when he said that continuing to exclude tropical forests from the global efforts to fight climate change "makes no sense scientifically, and it makes no sense politically or economically."

Despite this outpouring of enthusiasm, REDD remains controversial. Critics, including some European countries, argue that even with new technologies it will be complicated to monitor. Some environmental groups maintain that allowing polluters to offset their emissions by investing in forestry projects will undermine low-carbon technologies without meaningfully reducing emissions (something REDD supporters say can be avoided by setting strong emissions caps).

There are also deep divisions over how to finance REDD projects. Some countries, most notably Brazil, argue that instead of integrating forest-preservation projects into international carbon markets, wealthy nations should reward developing countries that curb deforestation by paying into funds that the developing countries themselves control. Their reasons have partly to do with sovereignty concerns—Brazil doesn't fancy international monitors descending on its forests or weighing in on its land-management policies—and partly to do with the belief that allowing forests into carbon markets would let developed nations off the hook when it comes to cutting their own emissions. "Brazil is not interested in giving industrialized countries cheap carbon credits from protecting the Amazon if they are not going to stop building coal-fired power plants," says William Boyd, a professor of law at the University of Colorado who has worked extensively on REDD policy issues. But some REDD advocates hold that a fund-based system will be subject to political whims of donor nations and won't generate the kind of money needed to reduce deforestation at the scale and pace necessary to meet emission-reduction targets.

Another contentious issue is how to measure a nation's progress toward curbing deforestation. The most straightforward approach is to compare current or future deforestation rates to historical ones. But this method favors nations with a history of slash and burn, something countries like Costa Rica, which have taken pains to preserve their forests, argue is deeply unfair. This idea is also troubling to the Surui, who fear their REDD project could fail because they've kept their forests so pristine. To solve this quandary, some rainforest advocates, including Kevin Conrad, have proposed giving nations with a track record of good stewardship credit for early action. "If we don't provide incentives for countries that have so far maintained their forests, but otherwise have land suitable for conversion, then those forests are going to fall," Conrad explains. But the idea of giving credit for past successes raises eyebrows among those concerned about the in-

A researcher measures a tree in Bolivia's tropical forest.

Courtesy of the RAINFOR consortium

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tegrity of carbon markets. Similarly, for REDD to work, at least some of the money that is generated will have to go to agents of deforestation, such as commercial logging operations. Otherwise, there is no incentive for them to stop destroying forests. But this idea doesn't sit well with many environmentalists.

There is also the question of what REDD will mean for the well-being of indigenous people. Despite having occupied lands for years or generations, many forest-dwelling communities still lack formal titles, or even basic rights, to land and resources. Indigenous advocates fear that as REDD makes forests increasingly valuable, even more rights are likely to be wrested from native inhabitants. Groups like the Global Forest Coalition and the World Rainforest Movement paint a nightmare scenario of forced displacement at the hands of carbon speculators. "REDD projects do not help indigenous peoples and forest peoples," says Jihan Gearon of the Indigenous Environmental Network. "In fact they hurt these communities and take away access and rights to forests, traditional territories, and medicines."

REDD's supporters counter that, if well designed, the mechanism could actually benefit forest dwellers, by providing funding for services such as health care and education as well as by focusing fresh attention on the plight of indigenous people and their territories. "For decades, capitalists, socialists, private companies, governments, and local operators have blasted into tropical communities, razed forests, and moved on with little concern for the fact that they denuded the land," says John O. Niles, a REDD expert with the Tropical Forest Group, a forest policy think tank. "REDD will put a microscope on these issues. I think a UN-driven system of incentives for keeping forests—a system of oversight with some transparency—and the strong voice of critical observers will lead to more positive outcomes more of the time."

Certainly, some voluntary REDD projects have benefited forest dwellers. Among them is the Juma Sustainable Development Reserve, which encompasses 1.4 million acres of rainforest in the Brazilian state of Amazonas, an area that until a few years ago was plagued by illegal logging. Foreign businesses or governments can purchase offset credits on the voluntary carbon market, with funds going toward protecting the reserve's lush ecosystem, in part by compensating 6,000 Juma families for preserving their forests. Each family is given a monthly stipend and their villages are provided with solar panels, computers, and money for community services, such as schools and clinics. Monitoring is done by satellite. If the forest is damaged or destroyed, the family that owns the land is dropped from the program and their village put on warning. The project is still in the early stages, but if successful it could prevent the release of 190 million tons of carbon between now and 2050.

The Waxman-Markey climate bill would allow U.S. companies to offset emissions by investing in forest-conservation projects.

To some degree, REDD's effect on forest dwellers will depend on how the policy is structured. Some parties to the UN climate talks have proposed building protections for indigenous people into the REDD program in the post-Kyoto climate treaty. But the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have blocked this provision, a fact that has spawned outrage. Indigenous groups have turned out at UN climate conferences with placards reading, "No Rights, No REDD!"

Given the myriad obstacles, will REDD designers be able to develop a workable framework? Many people involved in REDD discussions think so. "I think the chances are very strong that if we get a climate agreement in Copenhagen REDD will be a part of it," says Tracy Johns of the Woods Hole Research Center, a scientific think tank that has researched REDD extensively. "All of the stakeholders that have been involved in the REDD process in recent years—governments, NGOs, the private sector, indigenous peoples—have done a lot of work and made a lot of progress on the issues and challenges. I think in many ways the REDD negotiation process is more advanced than many of the other lines of negotiation that are under way for Copenhagen."

This is not to say that the parties to the negotiation, and the civil society groups weighing in from the sidelines, are unaware of the challenges. Even REDD's strongest supporters admit that trying to fulfill all the hopes invested in the policy, while avoiding the possible pitfalls, is a risky proposition. But they support it just the same. "REDD is being asked to do a lot of things—improving governance, promoting sustainable development, and mitigating climate change—but the potential benefits are so great, it's a chance worth taking," explains Stephan Schwartzman of the Environmental Defense Fund. This is because REDD is the only existing mechanism that promises to make preserving living forests more lucrative than cutting them down—and only by accomplishing that feat can we hope to stem the tide of deforestation. Put another way, despite its shortcomings, REDD may be our last, best hope of saving the tropical forests, which are so essential to the future health of our planet. WM

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FROM KYOTO TO COPENHAGEN

This December, the world community will meet in Denmark to fashion a new climate change treaty. Deforestation is on the agenda. What are the odds of a deal?

By David Adam

Outside the Bella Center, on the outskirts of Copenhagen, stands a solitary wind turbine. Come early December, the machine is likely to become the most famous symbol of renewable energy in the world, or certainly the most talked about. Why? Because at that time the Bella Center will host key United Nations talks that aim to secure a new global deal to tackle the threat of global warming. If the talks succeed, then the convention center's wind turbine will launch a thousand news reports that claim it points the way to a low-carbon future. If they fail, the windmill will stand only as a silent witness to a vital chance missed. Perhaps the last chance.

The December talks are the latest round of negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The series of annual talks can trace its roots to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, and in 1997 it spawned the Kyoto Protocol, the world's only existing treaty aimed at restricting the greenhouse gas emissions that drive global warming. The first phase of Kyoto expires in 2012, and there is nothing yet lined up to replace it. For a seamless transition, and to give nations enough time to ratify a new treaty, analysts say pens must probably be put to paper on a new agreement in Copenhagen. To head off the worst of global warming, scientists say the world needs to slash its greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2050, which would mean an 80 percent cut for developed countries. The Copenhagen talks will attempt to make progress toward that goal. Europe wants them to set targets of 25 to 40 percent reductions by 2020 for rich nations.

A failure to agree on a new deal could spell disaster for emerging carbon markets, which are viewed as one of the only large-scale mechanisms available to cut emissions. Investment in clean technology and renewable energy could stall, and the much-vaunted road to a low-carbon economy could be blocked indefinitely.

A failure to agree on a climate deal in December could spell disaster for emerging carbon markets, one of the only large-scale mechanisms available to cut emissions.

A new global deal on climate also offers the best chance for launching a large-scale effort to address carbon emissions from deforestation, which accounts for one-fifth of all heat-trapping gasses released into the atmosphere each year. Forests were excluded from carbon-trading schemes set up under Kyoto, but the issue is firmly back on the agenda. It was reintroduced to the UNFCCC process at talks in Montreal in 2005 by the governments of Costa Rica and Papua New Guinea, supported by eight others. Two years later, on the Indonesian holiday isle of Bali, addressing emissions from deforestation was formally included in the action plan that kick-started the talks to produce a new treaty in Copenhagen. The decision was hailed as a step forward, but was light on detail. And if there is one thing the UNFCCC process likes, it is detail.

How much greenhouse gas is produced when different types of forest are felled? How do sustainable management and conservation change these emissions? How do changes in forest cover alter carbon stocks? The UNFCCC wants answers to these questions, and many more, before it allows forest management to be part of whatever emerges from Copenhagen. (One of these management schemes is REDD—Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation—discussed at length elsewhere in this special report, in Rhett Butler, "Big REDD," page A6.) Whether such efforts are funded through bilateral donations to tropical nations from their richer colleagues in the West or through carbon-credit schemes that reward individual projects, the process will only be trusted if experts can agree on the scale of likely benefits.

The UNFCCC has thrown these questions to its expert advisory group, which is drafting an early text of the Copenhagen treaty. The experts will also say how much they expect it will cost to implement and monitor such schemes. They will report on how well prepared

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The wind turbine at the Bella Center outside Copenhagen, where the next round of international climate talks will be held in December.

Doug Mcneall

tropical countries are to participate, and identify technical or institutional capacity gaps that must be plugged. All of this information will be absorbed by the UNFCCC process, which must crystallize from it a rule book on which countries can agree in December.

It has not been plain sailing so far. When climate negotiations resumed for the first time since Bali in December 2008, in the Polish city of Poznan, hopes were high that agreement on deforestation offered a relatively easy win for nations eager to prove they were taking climate change seriously. In fact, the discussions were quickly soured by an argument about the deletion of a reference to the rights of indigenous people in the draft text, for which campaigners blamed New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Amid protests and accusations, no decision was reached. The issue will be revisited in Bonn.

Under the UNFCCC rules, all countries must agree on everything for the Copenhagen meeting to produce a new treaty, which means the fate of a forest management scheme is tied to wider agreement in Copenhagen.

So, what are the chances of such an agreement being signed in the Danish capital? To be considered a success, British officials say that besides serious short-term targets for all rich countries, including the U.S., a new deal will need some signal from large developing nations such as China that they will endeavor to reduce their own emissions. In the jargon of the UNFCCC, this discussion, the most politically loaded of all, is known as "a shared vision on long-term cooperative action on climate change."

In reality, few nations share any kind of vision when it comes to action on climate change. The world has changed since Kyoto was negotiated: the booming Chinese economy has seen the country overtake the United States as the world's largest polluter, traditional divides between the rich world and the poor world are crumbling, and the failure of Kyoto to make any meaningful dent in emissions has given ammunition to those opposed to a sequel. Meanwhile, the warnings from the scientists have become more urgent and the consequences of inaction painted in even starker terms.

Although other nations, India chief among them, will be big players on the Copenhagen stage, the search for a new climate treaty has been described as a straight fight between the United States and China. For a new deal to succeed, both countries must be included. China wants the U.S. to acknowledge its responsibilities, while the U.S. points out that Western efforts to cut emissions will be pointless if Chinese emissions

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soar as predicted, and wants China to at least make an effort. For them to sign up in Copenhagen, both will want to be able to claim victory.

Many are hoping that President Obama will break this deadlock. The United States signed Kyoto, but President Clinton never submitted it for ratification to a hostile Senate, which made it clear it would oppose on economic grounds any deal that did not set binding targets for the developing world—code for China. President Bush distanced the U.S. further from what he called a "flawed treaty."

One problem for those trying to broker the Copenhagen deal is the consequent twin-track nature of the talks. Because the United States is outside the Kyoto process, a new world agreement to include the U.S. must be discussed separately from efforts to extend Kyoto beyond 2012. Why not scrap Kyoto and work on something totally new for everybody? The developing world has voiced fears that rich countries would use that as a chance to escape from Kyoto's existing binding targets.

The U.S. may be forced to blink first, but Obama's team will not want a repeat of Kyoto and will sign something only if they know it can be converted into domestic law. That means building support in Congress and preparing a federal cap-and-trade system, which would almost certainly be the route chosen to meet any future U.S. carbon targets. Opinion is divided on whether such legislation needs to pass before December. Domestic targets in the United States would send a positive signal, but they might tie the hands of the U.S. negotiators in Copenhagen.

Western officials insist that the Chinese leadership is more aware of climate change than they are often given credit for. The country is still likely to resist binding targets, but it knows some pledge of future action will be needed to appease the U.S. and give President Obama the political room he needs. Last year China floated the idea that rich countries pay 0.7 percent of their GDP to poorer ones to help them adapt to the effects of global warming. The developed world is unlikely to agree to this, but some see the Chinese move as a positive step toward a meaningful negotiation.

One route to draw the Chinese into a Copenhagen deal could be for the West to agree that large developing nations can work to reduce their anticipated future growth in emissions—known as business as usual (BAU). The European Union has floated cuts, known as "diversions," from BAU of 15 to 30 percent for China and others by 2020 or so.

Elsewhere, India has taken a hard line so far and regularly voices its opposition to legally binding targets. But it has indicated that it would be willing to work to keep its growing per capita emissions below those of industrialized countries. Brazil, another key country, has pledged to cut deforestation 70 percent within a decade, saving a potential 4.8 billion tons of carbon dioxide.

With the talks heading toward the finish line, there remains much to do, and many senior figures in the field of climate change are already privately playing down the chances of a breakthrough at Copenhagen. The talks have come too soon for the new Obama administration, they warn. Others are pessimistic about the chances of serious targets being set, never mind being met. The preparatory meetings may help clear the table, but the serious emissions targets that will form the backbone of a new treaty are unlikely to appear until the closing days of the Copenhagen meeting.

Only short-term emissions goals are likely to drive the necessary political and technology changes. To make that happen, a whole string of supporting decisions on adaptation, financing, and technology transfer are needed as well.

It's a big ask, and some are already warning it may not be possible—especially given the current worldwide financial woes. For all the talk of Copenhagen being the finishing line, the talks could be allowed to slide into next year. There is too much at stake to call the whole thing a failure in December. The Bella Center's wind turbine could yet see further action. And the fight to reduce emissions by protecting the world's forests may have to wait just a little longer. WM

Delegates at an extended session of the UN Climate Change Conference in Bali, Indonesia, in December 2007.

AFP/Getty Images

David Adam is environment correspondent for the *Guardian*.

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THE BRAZILIAN DILEMMA

A nation struggles not to exploit its own greatest resource.

By Marcelo Leite

Seen from the height of 36,000 feet aboard a Brazilian Air Force jet, the Amazon rainforest looks tranquil as we approach our destination, the town of Tabatinga, a jungle outpost in the state of Amazonas where Brazil meets Colombia and Peru. A dark green velvet blankets the land as far as we can see through the fluffy clouds below us. The monotone is free of vehicle tracks, broken only by muddy threads of rivers flowing into the Upper Solimões, as the main branch of the mighty Amazon River is called where it enters the country on its 4,000-mile descent from the Peruvian Andes to the Atlantic.

But if this five-hour flight from São Paulo offers a glimpse of a vast and untouched Amazon, it also highlights the checkerboarding created by recent development. To reach the wilderness from the south, we first fly over countless towns, coffee and sugar cane plantations, and processing plants covering the state of São Paulo. Then the flight continues northward over immense cattle areas that lay siege to the unique, biologically diverse floodplain called the Pantanal, in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul. Passing over Rondônia state, an hour or so before we land, we see how soybean plantations—prominent newer stars in the country's growing array of exports—have replaced whole swaths of Amazon rainforest.

In sum, the flight gives the passenger a quick snapshot of a massive ecological dilemma. Of the original 1.5 million square miles of Brazilian Amazon forest, far and away the world's largest, some 82 percent remains intact. This entire area, roughly the size of India, is home to only twenty-four million people and is endowed with incredible biodiversity of global significance. But it continues to give way to logging, cattle, and soy plantations.

The big question is whether this southern giant will follow the development path favored by many Brazilians, once again plundering Amazonia's natural capital and suffering the severe consequences of deforestation. Or will it learn from unsustainable prior experience along its Atlantic coast, and resist dragging the Amazon rainforest into the same trap?

Even as Brazil pursues policies to measure and slow deforestation in the Amazon rainforest, it advances others that could speed up the devastation.

The recent news has been good. According to satellite photos taken by Brazil's highly regarded National Institute for Space Research, deforestation rates have been dropping steadily since 2004. That was the year that President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, responding to increasing pressure from the international community and a growing contingent of ecologically minded Brazilian voters, revealed the Amazon Deforestation Action Plan. The plan involves tighter controls over loggers and ranchers, including fines and even imprisonment, and the refusal of credit by official banks to farmers who are not able to document that they abide by environmental regulations. Chief among these is the Forestry Code, which requires the preservation of at least 80 percent of forest cover on Amazonian properties.

Another piece of good news is Brazil's Amazon Fund, an innovative idea first announced by former Environment Minister Marina Silva at the United Nations climate conference in Bali in 2007. The fund, newly operational this year, collects voluntary contributions from other nations, companies, and even individuals: the government of Norway has pledged $1 billion to it, of which a first installment of $110 million was deposited at the end of March. Another $18 million is expected to come from Germany soon. Fund officials working at the National Economic and Social Development Bank, a federal agency, then channel these funds to conservation groups and projects—but only after a country-wide reduction in deforestation has been achieved and documented.

The emergence of this government-run fund, a spinoff from international discussions about Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), constitutes an advance in several important ways. First, by retaining Brazilian control over how the money is spent, the fund's structure counters nationalist objections to receiving foreign funds in exchange for forest conservation and the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions. Control over the national patrimony has

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been a strongly valued concept in Brazil ever since the bad old days of the mid-twentieth century, when foreign interests owned local electric power and oil companies. Dreams of Amazonian prosperity arouse similar feelings. Second, for the first time after decades of resistance, the fund commits Brazil to deforestation targets. The goal is to achieve an 80 percent reduction in Amazon deforestation by 2020. Third, the willingness of Norway and other countries to hand over substantial monies to Brazil, for projects chosen by Brazil only, reflects growing international confidence in the country's ability to measure deforestation rates and select anti-deforestation controls.

But even as Brazil pursues policies to slow deforestation, it advances others that could speed it up. In particular is the government's $328 billion Accelerated Development Plan, an ambitious long-term national effort to strengthen Brazilian infrastructure and ties with neighboring countries by means of new highways, bridges, airfields, and electric power installations. Support for such initiatives comes from powerful farming and mining interests. Each new mile of road in the Amazon creates new opportunities to exploit the forests. Meanwhile, agribusiness leaders and sympathetic members of Congress have launched an offensive against the Forestry Code and some of its more restrictive provisions. They are, for example, trying to restore the 80 percent reserve rule in the Amazon to the 50 percent level previously required.

The bottom line: the battle is far from over when it comes to balancing Amazonian economic growth and conservation, and in Brasilia the tug of war continues. The severe effects of Amazonian deforestation on regional weather and the global climate are becoming ever better understood. The forest's biodiversity remains impressive, and there are still countless plant and animal species yet to be analyzed for their possible benefits to all of us. Still, the reality is that if Brazilians were forced to choose today between forest and development, many would favor the latter, matching the amount of forest that has already been lost and abandoning another 18 percent or more to development, exports, and short-term prosperity for some. Most would gladly retrace the path the nation followed along the coast while eradicating the no less diverse Atlantic forest—thus replicating the fate of most of the temperate forests in the developed world. WM

Forest burns near the city of Santarem in Brazil's Pará state, 2004.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

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ALGAE SOUP

Biofuels didn't work out so well the first time around. Will the next generation be better?

By Mark Rice-Oxley

Think of it as a watercooler moment. Only the water in the balloon drum is not particularly cool. And it's definitely not drinkable. For a start, the liquid is green. For another, it's teeming with carbon dioxide. And for a third, it's growing something slimy but precious that could promise a breakthrough in the quest for a sustainable, carbon-free motor fuel of the future: algae.

Call it algae alchemy, and if it's not a subject of conversation at a watercooler near you, then it's certainly become a talking point in laboratories and research centers of a dozen or more countries. This inauspicious organism is oily, feeds on carbon dioxide, and, unlike other crops cultivated for fuel, can take just a few days to grow. It's even the right color for a green revolution.

"It takes a matter of days to produce our harvest. With first-generation biofuel crops like corn, soy, and sugar cane it takes months," says Andy Beck, a former U.S. Energy Department public affairs chief who is now a vice president of the company PetroAlgae. At an eighteen-acre "farm" in Florida, PetroAlgae staff nurture the blooms through their brief life cycle: from green indoor tubes to watercooler-style drums and then on into small outdoor pools where the water is circulated by large paddles so the algae gets the right amount of light. The hope is that algae can be far more productive than edible crops for producing fuel—and use much less arable land. Beck sees a "very bright" future for this kind of renewable fuel.

Zip eastward across the Atlantic to a laboratory at Cambridge University, and Dr. Paul Dupree is no less enthusiastic about something equally unprepossessing: grass. Well, miscanthus grass, to be exact, a thick, hardy crop that could well end up in your tank someday. Dupree and his team are striving for an alchemy of their own: how to unlock the sugars in grasses and willow, which can then be fermented into ethanol.

The potential advantages, he says, are compelling: you don't need high-quality land, you don't need to use a lot of fuel to grow the crop, and you aren't using foodstuffs that might otherwise be used for human consumption. "You can harvest it each winter, you don't need to fertilize it, and you get good yields," he says.

A third promising type of crop being looked at is jatropha, a tropical bush whose seeds contain oil. It promises much because it can survive in harsh terrain not normally used for edible crops, and needs little fertilizer. Commercial plantations are springing up in the tropics on marginal land. In December last year, Air New Zealand successfully flew a Boeing 747 on a blend of jatropha and kerosene in one of the plane's engines.

Another and more controversial feedstock for second-generation biofuels involves forestry. Wood fibers are rich in cellulosic materials—as much as 50 percent in some cases—and companies in the U.S. and South America are already working on creating a biofuel feedstock from trees grown for that purpose. Not surprisingly, environmentalists are aghast at the idea, even though forestry use is likely to be subject to stringent sustainability criteria. "Genetically modified trees grown in huge monocultures in the South—this is where the money is going," says Adrian Bebb, a biofuels expert with Friends of the Earth in Germany. "This is one second-generation fuel that would get little support from us."

On balance, though, these speculative technologies could be crucial to global efforts to cut carbon emissions. One thing is certain: the current mix of fuels derived from crops like corn, soy, and palm oil have been discredited to the extent that almost no one now believes they are the solution. The new aim is to come up with a second generation of fuels that could be mass produced without tearing up forests, depleting traditional food crops, driving up grocery costs, or upsetting delicate social and economic balances. In short, the hunt is on for a new-generation elixir that can restore the tarnished reputation of biofuels.

Every green technology has grappled with an image problem as it struggles to become established. Wind farms? Noisy, unsightly, unreliable. Solar? Expensive, cumbersome. Tidal and wave power? Unproven, treacherous for wildlife. But none has suffered quite as badly as biofuels over the past two years. Once upon a time these were the sweet organic juices that were going to sanitize exhausts and save the planet. It wasn't as if they were some outlandish new idea. After all, Henry Ford originally envisaged powering his Model T with ethanol, and Brazil has been running on ethanol for decades. The beauty of biofuels was that they appeared truly renewable. Sow, grow, harvest, ferment (for ethanol), press (for biodiesel), refine, distribute. All that solar energy locked up in the self-replenishing natural world—and at last a way of harnessing it. Govern-

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ment mandates and quotas made it an attractive business. So did high oil prices. But that was then. A perfect storm has since shredded the first-generation biofuels model.

First, there was the suspicion that all that energy-intensive sowing, harvesting, fertilizing, and distributing was generating almost as much carbon as was being saved.

Second, a sudden spike in food prices led to damning (and sometimes hasty) conclusions: all the land being diverted to corn or palm oil for biofuel usage was reducing acreage for traditional farming, restricting global food supplies. The hungry got hungrier. "Full tanks but empty stomachs," was the cry, as environmentalists went on the attack, even though some official estimates show that biofuels, which take up around 1 percent of cropped land globally, were not the major cause of the price spike.

Third, a sudden slump in crude oil prices last year made biofuels start to look very expensive by comparison.

Last, and perhaps most egregiously, there was a growing awareness that in order to produce biofuels, large tracts of forests were being sacrificed, particularly in Southeast Asia. The volume of carbon being stored in forests—around 640 gigatons—is estimated to be larger than that in the atmosphere. The folly of laying waste to forests in the name of a technology that promised to cut carbon emissions was breathtakingly exposed.

The controversy has raised serious questions about government policies toward biofuels. In order to support green fuels, which cost around twice as much as gasoline to produce, governments across the world have adopted mandates requiring a certain proportion of motor fuel to contain a biofuels component.

Brazil had already shown the world how to do it, when the military regime introduced tax breaks for cars using ethanol in the 1970s. The Proalcool, or national alcohol program, resulted in around 80 percent of cars running on ethanol produced from Brazil sugar cane by the mid-1980s. The result is that today ethanol is big business in Brazil. Take a drive through Brazil's answer to California—places such as Ribeirão Preto, in the interior of São Paulo state—and the signs of the wealth created by this biofuel boom are everywhere: in the luxury condominiums, private schools, and vast golf courses constructed for the huge influx of foreign investors, and in the seemingly endless fields of sugar cane that stretch across this region of southeastern Brazil.

Brazilian ethanol is usually cited as one of the greenest and most efficient first-generation biofuels. But even here there are dissenting voices concerned about the rapacious use of land. Authorities insist that the sugar cane plantations that produce billions of liters of ethanol annually are hundreds of miles from the Amazon rainforest. But according to environmental campaigner Mario Menezes, cane production is beginning to encroach, as several Amazon states, including Amazonas, Pará, and Roraima, are now home to plantations.

There was a growing awareness that in order to produce biofuels, large tracts of forests were being sacrificed, reversing any carbon-emissions gains the fuels had promised.

Even when sugar cane is planted far from the Amazon it can impact the rainforest. As sugar cane takes up more and more land in Brazil's south, cattle ranchers are forced into the Amazon rainforest, where the land is cheaper. Once there, they decimate the forest, replacing dense jungle with pasture. Three of every four cows born in Brazil today are born in the Amazon, Menezes claims.

Elsewhere, biofuels quotas and mandates have become as controversial as the technology itself. The European Union had to overcome fierce resistance from environmentalists and some of its own legislators to push through a target last year stipulating that 10 percent of transport fuel should come from renewable sources by 2020. The United Kingdom has watered down its own quota, which currently requires fuel companies to add 325 liters of biofuel to every 10,000 liters of gasoline.

In the United States, former President George W. Bush's "Twenty in Ten" pledge to wean Americans off gasoline and ramp up biofuels usage accelerated a dash for ethanol, with production more than doubling from 2006 to 2008 and making the U.S. the world's number one ethanol producer. Concerns have multiplied that the surge into corn has had a serious effect not just on food prices but on agriculture around the world. As U.S. farmers switch out of soy and into corn, farmers in other countries have scrambled to fill the gap in the market, often clearing forested land to make room for soy plantations.

"The disruption that we have created in the world with these mandates in terms of diverting grain from food supply to produce fuel has been extraordinarily costly," says Lester Brown, president of the Earth Policy Institute. "Government intervention and subsidies are counterproductive," says John Constable, director of research and policy at Britain's Renewable Energy Foundation think tank, arguing that they skew markets and truncate innovation.

In an effort to address concerns about biofuels, the Obama administration has called for a review of the emissions caused by the industry and has required that new biofuels emit less than the fossil fuels they replace. The administration wants biofuels to be at least 20 percent cleaner than gasoline and diesel. But President Obama has persisted with the Bush-era mandate, which calls for thirty-six billion gallons of plant-based

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fuels in the mix by 2022. The majority of this—twenty-one billion gallons, according to the latest Environmental Protection Agency proposals—should come from the kind of second-generation biofuels that people like Beck and Dupree are working on.

The sun bombards the earth with more energy than man could possibly use or need; much is locked away in the natural world, not just in edible crops but in the cell walls of many plants of limited practical use to mankind. So for scientists like Dupree, the key is to unlock the energy coiled up in sugary compounds known as cellulose, which comprises about 33 percent of all plant matter.

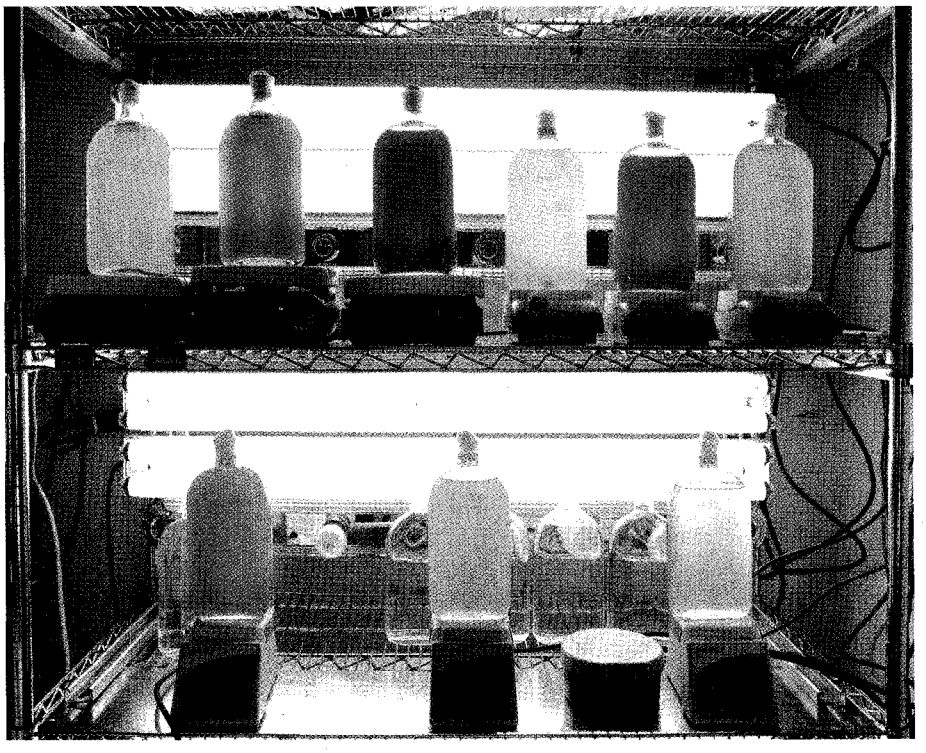
The raw data hints at the potential. Corn ethanol delivers only about 1.3 times the energy used to produce it; with Brazilian sugar cane ethanol it's about eight to ten times. With cellulosic plants, the yield could be as much as thirty times. Algae could be even more productive. The greenhouse gas emissions savings are impressive too: corn cuts emissions by around 20 percent, cane ethanol by around 50 percent, and cellulose potentially by around 90 percent.

And the benefits don't stop there. Algae, for example, thrives on carbon dioxide, so a firm like PetroAlgae can actually go to polluters and take the unwanted gas away. Once the oils from the algae have been retrieved, the algae also yields up a rich protein meal that can be used as animal feed. "With petroalgae we can achieve twenty-five to one hundred times the productivity of macrocrops like corn, soy, or sugar cane," Beck enthuses.

But if the potential of these second-generation biofuels seems impressive, the obstacles remain challenging. One problem with algae has to do with scale. Beck says that an acre of land can produce one liter of biodiesel in about two and a half hours—or about a gallon a day. This sounds like a lot until you consider the annual renewable target set by the U.S. of thirty-six billion gallons, which would require an area of almost one hundred million acres. PetroAlgae is pursuing licensing deals as a way of scaling up its activities.

Kai Wiechmann

Another issue is the time it takes to get a crop. Dr. Angela Karp, a British agricultural scientist who is involved in a government-funded $40 million program to develop second-generation biofuels, says that even if there were a eureka moment tomorrow in Dupree's lab, it would take years to grow enough plants to create large volumes of biofuels for cars. "You are looking at a five-year run-up to it going on a significant scale," she says. Jatropha can grow on marginal land and needs little water, but, says Giles Clark, editor of *Biofuel Review*, "the time from farming to production is about four years."



Bottles of biofuels in a lab at the University of California, Berkeley.

As for cost, the International Energy Agency estimates that second-generation biofuels currently average out at around $130 a barrel—expensive, given the current oil price. PetroAlgae's Beck would not be drawn on how cheaply his firm can produce a liter of biodiesel. Dupree says that when oil prices were up at $150 a barrel, the ethanols he works on would have been commercially viable. But now they are not. "Demonstration plants are being built and will be producing on a large scale in two to three years. They may not be commercial, though. It will depend on the crude price."

Despite such obstacles, second-generation biofuels remain the great hope of the next decade. Hydrogen cars still belong to the land of make-believe. Electric cars may look like a serious challenger, but battery ranges remain modest, and you have to generate electricity to power the battery. Besides, engineers reckon that hauling of heavy loads will still favor liquid fuels for the foreseeable future.

The biofuels industry has a long way to go to convince skeptics that it can produce clean, sustainable fuels cheaply, in sufficient volume, and without destabilizing global agriculture. But it still looks like the best alternative to come to grips with emissions in a world in which driving is only getting more popular. Much will depend on the success of ventures like PetroAlgae, and of scientists like Dupree. WM

Mark Rice-Oxley reports on environmental issues for the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Guardian*, and other publications. Tom Phillips in Rio de Janeiro contributed to this article.

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THE CASE FOR BIG AG

Industrial farming pollutes rivers, distorts politics, and hurts rural communities. But it might just save the rainforest.

By Michael Grunwald

Once upon a time—actually, it was just two years ago—almost everyone in the scientific and environmental communities thought of farm-grown biofuels as a green alternative to gasoline, a renewable win-win solution that would decrease global warming as well as increase agricultural incomes. Then an environmental lawyer named Tim Searchinger had an epiphany, and proved that almost everyone was wrong.

Searchinger wasn't a scientist, an economist, or an agronomist, and he was new to energy issues. But he had spent years analyzing and litigating the ecological impacts of agriculture, especially its intrusions into natural habitats, and he wasn't the kind of enviro who assumed that something was good just because it was "renewable." So he dug into the literature. A slew of studies had concluded that crop-based fuels would slash carbon emissions, mainly because the act of growing crops removes carbon from the atmosphere. But Searchinger realized the studies had completely ignored the real-world implications of devoting crops to cars instead of people. This was his epiphany: in a world with 6.7 billion mouths to feed, when you use an acre of farmland to grow fuel, somewhere an acre of something else is probably going to be converted into new farmland to grow food, and that something else is likely to be forests or wetlands that store far more carbon than farmland ever could. It certainly isn't going to be a parking lot, which was the implicit assumption of the earlier studies.

And sure enough, when Searchinger and others began incorporating these indirect land-use effects into their greenhouse gas assessments, they found that when biofuels use productive land, the emissions created by induced deforestation outweigh the carbon benefits—while increasing hunger and decreasing biodiversity, to boot.

Oops!

"The most pungent critique I've had was a scientist who just said, 'No duh!,'" says Searchinger, now a scholar at Princeton. "It all seems so obvious in retrospect."

The impact of this analytical booboo has been staggering. The United States and Europe have already enacted strict mandates for biofuel usage that are ravaging the planet in the name of saving it, jump-starting a $100 billion global industry in renewable fuels, forcing beleaguered automakers to manufacture counterproductive "flex-fuel" vehicles, artificially boosting demand for grain, and creating a deadly competition between the 800 million (and rising) people with cars and the 800 million (and rising) people with hunger problems. The grain it takes to fill an SUV's tank could feed an adult for a year, and the United States is now diverting one-fourth of its corn crop to ethanol, which has helped spark riots to protest rising food prices in countries like Haiti, Mexico, and Pakistan.

It has also ratcheted up deforestation rates through a chain reaction that Searchinger and I witnessed on a visit to the Amazon last year: as U.S. soybean farmers switch to corn to take advantage of the ethanol boom, Brazilian soybean farmers expand into cattle pastures, so cattlemen move to the rainforest. The effect is not instantaneous, but when grain prices go up, the forest comes down. Meanwhile, Indonesia has bulldozed so many of its forests and peatlands into palm oil plantations for the European biodiesel market that it has surged from twenty-first to third among the world's leading carbon emitters. Malaysia has converted almost all its uncultivated land into fuel. Biofuels have made deforestation more attractive than ever. Searchinger's epiphany has a clear implication for public policy: biofuels that do not reduce emissions over their life cycle should not receive lavish government support. This has been echoed by the World Bank, the National Academies of Science, and even the British agency created to promote biofuels.

Unfortunately, the agricultural industrial complex that makes billions of dollars from crop-based biofuels dominates government farm policies in the United States and Europe. For example, just months before Searchinger published his revelations in *Science*, Congress passed a bipartisan energy law mandating a stunning thirty-six billion gallons of biofuels by 2022. While lawmakers later added a life-cycle test of sorts, they also included an exemption for corn ethanol, once it (inevitably) fails that test. Recent studies suggest that first-generation agro-fuels like corn-based ethanol would never pass a legitimate test. Even speculative second-generation fuels like cellulosic ethanol made from switchgrass would increase overall emissions if they were produced on arable land, though there are some interesting experiments under way using fuel sources such as algae that could get around this problem (see Mark Rice-Oxley, "Algae Soup," page A17). But Big Agriculture and its water carriers in Congress have made it clear

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they will defend biofuels against any technical challenge; House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson furiously vowed to scuttle the unrelated climate change bill after the Environmental Protection Agency tried to include land-use calculations in its life-cycle tests—even though Congress had directed the EPA to do so with Peterson's support, even though the tests were still predictably biofuel friendly, and even though the climate change legislation (outrageously) exempts agricultural emissions. "I want this message sent down the street!" Peterson seethed—in case anyone in the Obama administration was unaware that Big Ag was untouchable.

But Searchinger has had another epiphany—really, an epiphany about his first epiphany. It's no great shock that farm-grown fuels are an aggie boondoggle; U.S. agricultural policy teems with price supports, disaster aid, direct payments, insurance subsidies, tax breaks, and countless other policies with the common goal of shoveling dollars to industrial farmers. And it's no surprise to see Big Ag pushing policies that would ravage the rainforest; Searchinger has spent much of his legal career defending the earth against agricultural assaults. But the more he's thought about his analytical and mathematical scoop, the more he's realized it has a hidden pro–Big Ag message.

The message is that land is an incredibly precious commodity—so precious that we're better off burning gasoline on a warming planet than using land as a substitute. It turns out that land is really great at growing the food we need to feed us, and really great at storing the carbon we need to save us, but not so great at growing the fuel we need to transport us; converting the entire U.S. grain harvest to ethanol would supply less than one-fifth of our automotive fuel. The key point is that for each acre of potential cropland that isn't used for food production, either an acre of nature is going to be converted into new cropland—an acre of nature that has probably been storing up carbon for years—or the planet is going to get a bit less food. And the planet is going to need a lot more food. There could be nine billion mouths to feed by 2050, many of whom will (one hopes) be able to afford more resource-intensive foods like meat. But crop yields are no longer increasing as much as they once were, and ecologists believe that water shortages, soil erosion, and climate change could actually shrink future yields; every degree Celsius of global warming is expected to reduce global yields by about 10 percent. Even if modern technology helps boost yields in Africa, and farm-grown biofuels are somehow strangled in their cradle by an outbreak of global sanity, there's going to be intense pressure for more farmland and more deforestation.

But deforestation already accounts for 20 percent of all carbon emissions, and scientists believe the world needs to reduce emissions 80 percent by 2050 to avert an unthinkable catastrophe. So unless we can eliminate all emissions from all other sources—from cars to light bulbs to burping cows—we need to limit the expansion of agriculture.

We're going to need more food. And we're going to need to grow it on less land. It sounds like we're going to need industrial agriculture.

Hmm. We're going to need more food. And we're going to need our food growers to use less land. It sounds like we're going to need—industrial agriculture.

In the future, for the same reason we won't want to sacrifice valuable cropland for biofuels, we won't want to sacrifice it for low-yield organic kale either. As much as we love Michael Pollan's delicious prose, as much as we feel we ought to love locally grown, pesticide-free, genetically unmodified, naturally fertilized, antibiotic-free, multigrain whatever, we're going to need the world's farmland to produce as much sustenance as possible on as little ground as possible, so that we can leave the Amazon alone. Just as we'll have to increase people-per-acre urban densities to rein in exurban sprawl, we'll have to increase calorie-per-acre farm production to rein in agricultural sprawl. Michelle Obama's little garden is a lovely gesture, but it's not going to feed a world where food demand is rising much faster than food supply, where overpumping is lowering water tables and imperiling agriculture in China and India, and where grain reserves dwindled to an all-time low last year. To feed that world, we'll need Big Ag to do what it does best.

This will require a jolting paradigm shift. Industrial farmers have a well-earned reputation in policy circles as obesity-promoting, pesticide-spewing, water-wasting, energy-hogging, illegal-alien-hiring, politician-buying corporate welfare queens who wax hypocritical about family farmers and the "heartland" while driving small farms out of business and hollowing out rural towns. Their subsidies help deplete aquifers, destroy rivers, intensify Third World poverty, and scuttle free trade deals that would boost the nonagricultural sectors of the U.S. economy. But now that their high yields look like the best way to limit agriculture to a sustainable footprint that would leave enough trees and marshes to avoid a planetary emergency, it might be time for good-government types, environmentalists, anti-hunger activists, free trade supporters, health advocates, and other perennial Big Ag bashers to start thinking about how to work with them. Those taxpayer-supported amber waves of grain have environmental benefits as well as costs.

That doesn't mean we have to support agro-fuels—although we should support efforts to convert crop waste into energy as long as it doesn't remove land from production. We don't have to

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support egregious subsidies for multimillionaire farmers, either—although given the hopeless politics of the issue it might make sense to agree to support them if they're tied to soil, water, and energy conservation requirements. But we ought to recognize and encourage the potential of genetically modified crops to produce high-yield, drought-resistant crops that require fewer petroleum-based fertilizers and pesticides. And we ought to acknowledge that agricultural consolidation, while painful for family farmers and rural communities, is not only inevitable but in many ways desirable. Big Ag can use the advantages of bigness not only to boost production (by buying the best seeds and inputs and tractors) but to reduce waste (with precision GPS gadgets that adjust spraying and watering according to the topography of the field). We might even rethink our opposition to those icky confined-feeding operations, especially when they're clumping together (more greenhouse-friendly) chickens rather than cows. In exchange, maybe those feedlots could stop destroying the Chesapeake Bay.

That would be Big Ag's end of the bargain: Eliminate its most egregious and least sustainable practices. Stop farming to the edge of the river, and stop draining wetlands. Keep the cows out of the stream, and more runoff on the farm. Stop spreading petroleum-based fertilizer when and where it isn't needed. Stop creating a massive dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. The industry made strides dealing with its erosion problems in response to federal incentives; perhaps it could clean up the rest of its act with proper inducements.

Big Ag has been so politically successful for so long that it might resist any compromise, but the farm lobby knows its cue-the-violins baloney about humble tillers of the heartland soil might not justify redistribution from taxpayers to agro-industrialists forever. And one positive by-product of the trend toward corporate farming is that corporations tend to worry about their images. If agriculture keeps producing more than 30 percent of the world's emissions, including the deforestation effect, it's going to get stuck with the mother of all image problems.

Brazil is an interesting example. Its larger producers make our Big Ag look like Jeffersonian yeomen, and they've become international pariahs to the save-the-rainforest crowd. But they're much lighter on the land than the slash-and-burn subsistence farmers on the Amazon frontier.

It's probably too late for another green revolution; we're bumping up against the limits of photosynthesis, and global yield increases have dwindled to about 1 percent per year. And there would be social costs to a large-scale expansion of industrial agriculture in Africa and the rest of the low-yield Third World, as well as political costs; it's no coincidence that the world's biggest soybean farmer is also the governor of a large Brazilian province on the Amazon frontier. But agricultural consolidation is going to continue no matter what; economies of scale create huge efficiencies, and they give large producers at least some counterweight against the vastly consolidated processing, shipping, and retailing industries. Searchinger's epiphanies remind us that if it's going to happen eventually, it might as well happen now, while there's still a rainforest to save.

World hunger and global warming are two of the great challenges of this century, and they are inextricably linked through agriculture and the land. About five million children already die of nutrition-related causes every year, and about fifteen million acres of carbon-rich forests already get converted into farms every year. As the world population rises, both of those figures are likely to explode unless agricultural productivity can explode as well. So by all means, we should ask industrial farmers to clean up their act. But first, we might want to beg them to save the planet and feed the world. WM

Combine harvesters work their way across a rye field in Wilamette Valley, Oregon.

Bruce Forster

Michael Grunwald, a senior correspondent at *Time* magazine, is the author of *The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida, and the Politics of Paradise.*

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FORESTS AT THEIR LIMIT

One scientist's ground-level view.

By George M. Woodwell

Step with me from the cool moist forest of the Amazon basin into the edge of a thousand-acre tract of soybeans. Feel the weight of the tropical sun on that open field. Touch the bare earth between the soy plants and realize that one would not walk with bare feet more than a few steps on such a surface. Squinting in that brightness, retreat with me quickly into the comfort of the forest, where five layers of foliage shield us from a sun that burns directly overhead year-round. Wonder with me that those leaves, even those at the top of the towering canopy, are not burning under the relentless heat of the sun that we felt in the field. Every breath of air in the forest is moist. Evaporation is occurring everywhere in all those layers of leaves, cooling the entire forest.

We are traveling in the southeastern Amazon basin in the Brazilian states of Mato Grosso and Pará. Southward is the transition from rich moist tropical forest to the diminished and drier woody vegetation called *cerrado*. It is this great arc of the southern part of the basin that is under pressure from the massive expansion of industrial agriculture to enter world markets for soy products. The soils are deep and rich, and there is, for the moment at least, no need for irrigation. As we look out across the landscape, we can see that fully half the land has been turned from forest to soy. The roots that once tapped reserves of water and nutrients tens of feet into the soil are no longer there. The deep canopy of trees cooled by evaporation of tons of water per hour is no longer feeding water and energy into the atmosphere. The entire landscape has transformed from cool to hot, from moist to dry, from diverse and rich to uniform and simple ... and hot, hot, hot.

Hotter and drier here, we observe, means hotter and drier there, just downwind, for the local climate is affected as well when the clouds do not build up and storms do not occur. Drier there means that the moist forest downwind, ever vulnerable to disruption, is drier too. In a dry time, even the moist forest can burn. The first fire is small, a ground fire. The next fire, more severe, burns dead trees and girdles others that die. The forest is diminished and opened to the sun and becomes warmer and still drier. Soon it becomes savannah, an open forested shrubland more akin to *cerrado* than the tropical moist forest we admired. So the transformation marches ahead of the bulldozer and the chain saw, gradually moving the climate as well as the frontier of deforestation.

It is time for us all to appreciate that the earth's remaining primary forests must be preserved intact as essential elements of human habitat.

But the story is even larger, for the warming of the earth is being driven by increases in the gases in the atmosphere that absorb radiant heat, especially carbon dioxide, a major product of both combustion and decay. The systematic destruction of the forest and the organic matter in soils adds to the accumulation of heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere. Globally deforestation is contributing about 1.5 billion tons of carbon to the annual accumulation in the atmosphere of about five billion tons from all human activities. Those five billion tons are the amount of carbon that must be removed from current releases to stabilize the composition of the atmosphere immediately. Stopping deforestation would make a major contribution toward that objective. This is the first step in correcting the problem. We are on a slippery slope. The expansion of agriculture into primary forests, especially in the tropics, is already destabilizing climates globally. The changing climate will ultimately destabilize the new agriculture as well.

We have clearly discovered one of the major biophysical limits of our planet. It is time for us all to appreciate that the earth's remaining primary forests globally, especially the tropical forests, must be preserved intact as essential elements in the continued functioning of the human habitat. The growing global problems now embrace every citizen's local interests and welfare. All nations and all communities need to join in a common effort to resolve the global problems that have been made in ignorance, through collective efforts to abuse nature for short-term human purposes.

Exchanging forest for soy, or some other non-forest monocrop, may seem an attractive deal at the moment. But it will be a very short and expensive moment. WM

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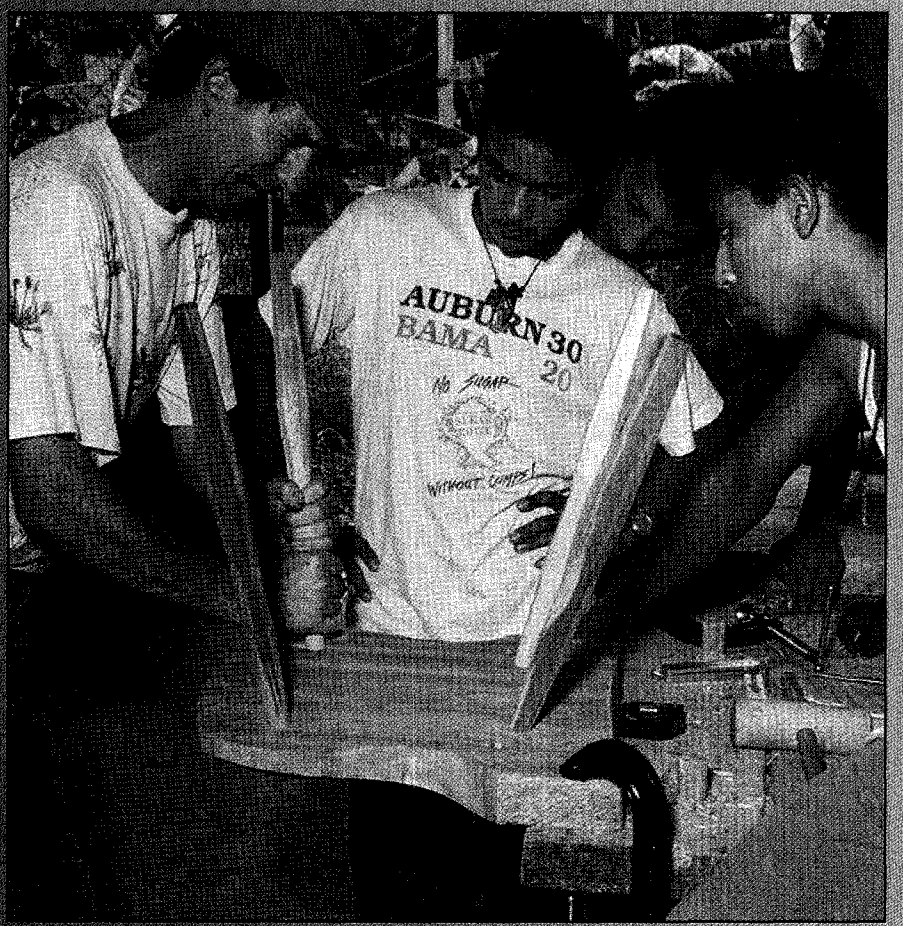

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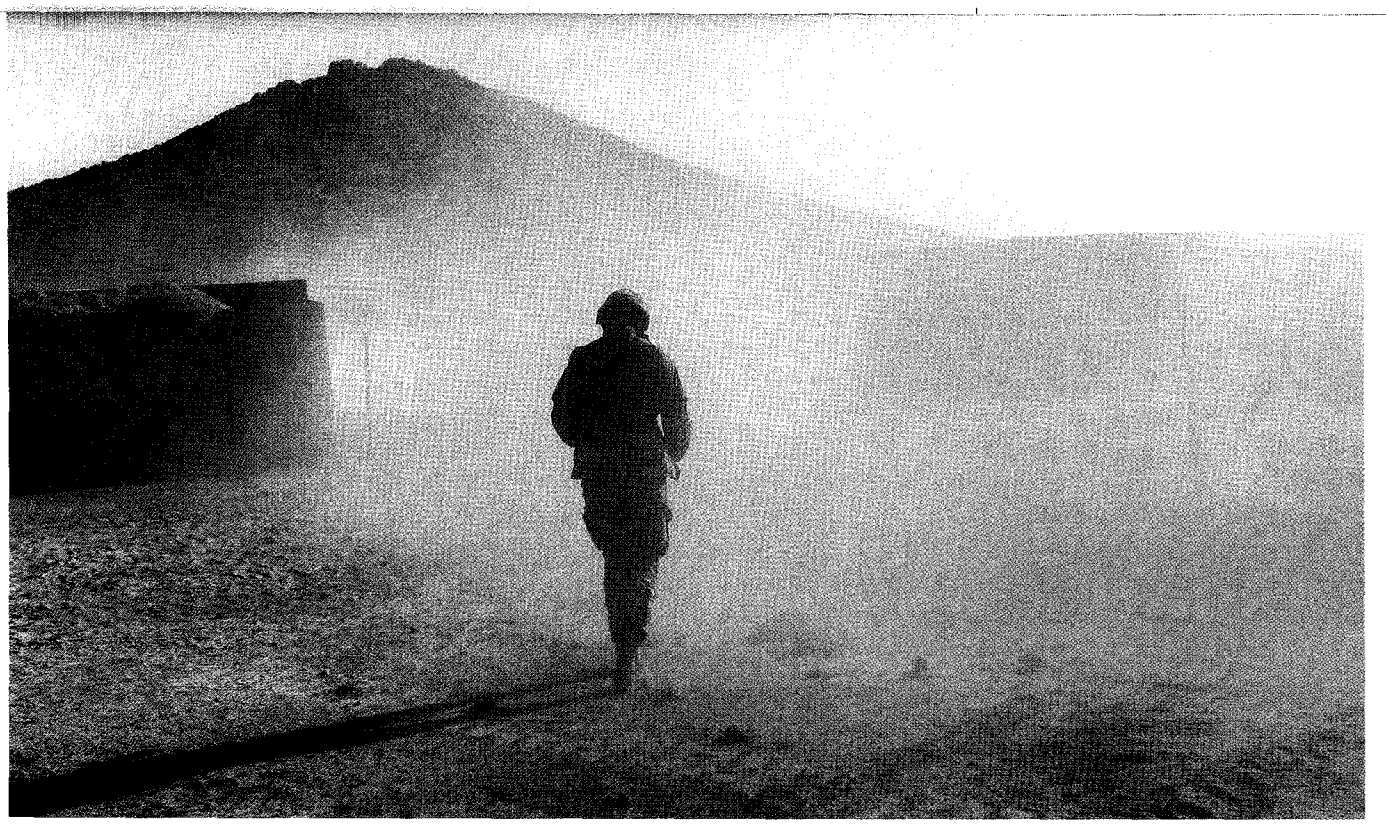

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Winning the Good War

Why Afghanistan is not Obama's Vietnam.

By Peter Bergen

Throughout his campaign last year, President Barack Obama said repeatedly that the real central front of the war against terrorists was on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. And now he is living up to his campaign promise to roll back the Taliban and al-Qaeda with significant resources. By the end of the year there will be some 70,000 American soldiers in Afghanistan, and the Obama administration is pushing for billions of dollars in additional aid to both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This has caused consternation among some in the Democratic Party. In May, fifty-one House Democrats voted against continued funding for the Afghan war. And David Obey, the chairman of the powerful House Appropriations Committee, which controls federal spending, says the White House must show concrete results in Afghanistan within a year—implying that if it doesn't do so, he will move to turn off the money spigot. If this is the attitude of Obama's own party, one can imagine what the Republicans will be saying if his "Af-Pak" strategy doesn't start yielding results as they gear up for the 2010 midterm elections.

It's not just politicians who are souring on the Afghan war. A USA Today poll earlier this year found that 42 percent of Americans believe the war is a mistake, up from 6 percent in 2002. The media has only added to the gloom. *Newsweek* ran a cover story in January speculating that Afghanistan could be Obama's Vietnam. And the *New York Times* has run prominent opinion pieces with headlines like "The 'Good War' Isn't Worth Fighting" and "Fearing Another Quagmire in Afghanistan."

But the growing skepticism about Obama's chances for success in Afghanistan is largely based on deep misreadings of both the country's history and the views of its people, which are often compounded by facile comparisons to the United States's misadventures of past decades in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Afghanistan will not be Obama's Vietnam, nor will it be his Iraq. Rather, the renewed and better re-

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sourced American effort in Afghanistan will, in time, produce a relatively stable and prosperous Central Asian state.

Objections to Obama's ramp-up in Afghanistan begin with the observation that Afghanistan has long been the "graveyard of empires"—as went the disastrous British expedition there in 1842 and the Soviet invasion in 1979, so too the current American occupation is doomed to follow. In fact, any number of empire builders, from Alexander the Great to the Mogul emperor Babur in the sixteenth century to the British in the Second Afghan War three decades after their infamous defeat, have won military victories in Afghanistan. The graveyard of empires metaphor belongs in the graveyard of clichés.

The same people who argue that Afghanistan is unconquerable argue that it is ungovernable—that the country has never been a functioning nation-state, and that its people have no interest in helping to build a more open and peaceful society. Neither of these things is true.

The Soviets, of course, spent almost a decade waging war in Afghanistan, only to retreat ignominiously in 1989, an important factor in their own empire's consignment to history's dustbin. But today's American-led intervention in Afghanistan is quite different from the Communist occupation. The Soviet army killed more than a million Afghans and forced some five million more to flee the country, creating what was then the world's largest refugee population. The Soviets also sowed millions of mines (including some that resembled toys), making Afghanistan one of the most heavily mined countries in the world. And Soviet soldiers were a largely unprofessional rabble of conscripts who drank heavily, used drugs, and consistently engaged in looting. The Soviets' strategy, tactics, and behavior were, in short, the exact opposite of those used in successful counterinsurgency campaigns.

Unsurprisingly, the brutal Soviet occupation provoked a countrywide insurrection that drew from a wide array of ethnic groups—Tajiks, Uzbeks, Pashtuns, and Hazaras—and every class in Afghan society, from mullahs to urban professionals to peasants. By contrast, the insurgents in Afghanistan today are overwhelmingly rural Pashtuns with negligible support in urban areas and among other ethnic groups.

That makes quite a difference to the scale of today's insurgency. Even the most generous estimates of the size of the Taliban force hold it to be no more than 20,000 men, while authoritative estimates of the numbers of Afghans on the battlefield at any given moment in the war against the Soviets range up to 250,000. The Taliban insurgency today is only around 10 percent the size of what the Soviets faced.

And while today's Afghan insurgents are well financed, in part by the drug trade, this backing is not on the scale of the financial and military support that the anti-Communist guerrillas enjoyed in the 1980s. The mujahideen were the recipients of billions of dollars of American and Saudi aid, large-scale Pakistani training, and sophisticated U.S. military hardware such as highly effective anti-aircraft Stinger missiles, which ended the Soviets' command of the air.

A corollary to the argument that Afghanistan is unconquerable is the argument that it is ungovernable—that the country has never been a functioning nation-state, and that its people, mired in a culture of violence not amenable to Western fixes, have no interest in helping to build a more open and peaceful society. Certainly endemic low-level warfare is embedded in Pashtun society—the words for cousin and enemy in Pashtu, for instance, are the same. But the level of violence in Afghanistan is actually far lower than most Americans believe. In 2008 more than 2,000 Afghan civilians died at the hands of the Taliban or coalition forces; this is too many, but it is also less than a quarter of the deaths last year in Iraq, a country that is both more sparsely populated and often assumed to be easier to govern. (At the height of the violence in Iraq, 3,200 civilians were dying *every month*, making the country around twenty times more violent than Afghanistan is today.) Not only are Afghan civilians much safer under American occupation than Iraqis, they are also statistically less likely to be killed in the war than anyone living in the United States during the early 1990s, when the U.S. murder rate peaked at more than 24,000 killings a year.

An assertion that deserves a similarly hard look is the argument that nation building in Afghanistan is doomed because the country isn't a nation-state, but rather a jury-rigged patchwork of competing tribal groupings. In fact, Afghanistan is a much older nation-state than, say, Italy or Germany, both of which were only unified in the late nineteenth century. Modern Afghanistan is considered to have emerged with the first Afghan empire under Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747, and so has been a nation for decades longer than the United States. Accordingly, Afghans have a strong sense of nationhood.

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What they have had just as long, however, is a weak central state. The last king of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, who reigned from 1933 to 1973, presided lightly over a country in a time that Afghans recall with great nostalgia as one of relative peace and prosperity. Today President Hamid Karzai similarly presides over a weak central government. Critics contend that President Karzai is unable or unwilling to fight the epic corruption in his government, and joke that he is only the "mayor of Kabul." This criticism is largely accurate, but misses the fact that Karzai is still a somewhat popular leader in Afghanistan. Fifty-two percent of Afghans say that the president is doing a good job, only 15 percent less than the number of Americans who say the same thing about Obama—and that is eight years after Karzai assumed the leadership of a country in which any honeymoon period has long since evaporated. Afghans are also wildly enthusiastic about participating in real politics. In the 2004 presidential election, more than 80 percent of them turned out to vote, an accomplishment Americans haven't been able to claim since the late nineteenth century.

So if Afghanistan itself is not necessarily ungovernable, what of the other argument—that as far as the United States is concerned, the war there will be a rerun of Vietnam? Hardly. The similarities between the Taliban and the Vietcong end with their mutual hostility toward the U.S. military. The some 20,000 Taliban fighters are too few to hold even small Afghan towns, let alone mount a Tet-style offensive on Kabul. As a military force, they are armed lightly enough to constitute a tactical problem, not a strategic threat. By contrast, the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army at the height of the Vietnam War numbered more than half a million men who were equipped with artillery and tanks, and were well supplied by both the Soviet Union and Mao's China. And the number of casualties is orders of magnitude smaller: in Afghanistan last year, 154 American soldiers died, the largest number since the fall of the Taliban; in 1968, the deadliest year of the Vietnam conflict, the same number of U.S. servicemen were dying *every four days*. Estimates of the total civilian death toll in Vietnam are in the low millions, while estimates of the total number of Afghan civilian casualties since the fall of the Taliban are in the thousands.

Nor has the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan been anywhere near as expensive as Vietnam was—in fact, that's in part why American efforts have not met with as much success as they could have. During the Vietnam War, the United States spent almost 10 percent of its GDP on military spending. Today's military expenditures are somewhere between 4 and 5 percent of GDP, and of that, Afghanistan last year consumed only 6 percent of the total expenditure, while Iraq sucked up some five times that amount. And unlike the Vietnamese and Iraqis, Afghans have generally embraced international forces. In 2005, four years after the fall of the Taliban, eight out of ten Afghans expressed in a BBC/ABC poll a favorable opinion of the United States, and the same number supported foreign soldiers in their country. Contrast that with Iraq, where a BBC/ABC poll in 2005 found that only one in three Iraqis supported international forces in their country. While the same poll taken in Afghanistan this year reported, for the first time, that just under half of Afghans have a favorable view of the United States, that's still a higher approval rating than the U.S. gets in any other Muslim-majority country save Lebanon. And a solid majority of Afghans continue to approve of the international forces in their country. What Afghans want is not for American and other foreign soldiers to leave, but for them to deliver on their promises of helping to midwife a more secure and prosperous country.

Skeptics of Obama's Afghanistan policy say that the right approach is to either reduce American commitments there or just get out entirely. The short explanation of why this won't work is that the United States has tried this already—twice. In 1989, after the most successful covert program in the history of the CIA helped to defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan, the George H. W. Bush administration closed the U.S. embassy in Kabul. The Clinton administration subsequently effectively zeroed out aid to the country, one of the poorest in the world. Out of the chaos of the Afghan civil war in the early 1990s emerged the Taliban, who then gave sanctuary to al-Qaeda. In 2001, the next Bush administration returned to topple the Taliban, but because of its ideological aversion to nation building it ensured that Afghanistan was the least-resourced per capita reconstruction effort the United States has engaged in since World War II. An indication of how desultory those efforts were was the puny size of the Afghan army, which two years after the fall of the Taliban numbered only 5,000 men, around the same size as the police department of an American city like Houston. We got

The similarities between the Taliban and the Vietcong end with their mutual hostility toward the U.S. military. The Taliban fighters number only around 20,000—too few to hold even small Afghan towns, let alone mount a Tet-style offensive on Kabul.

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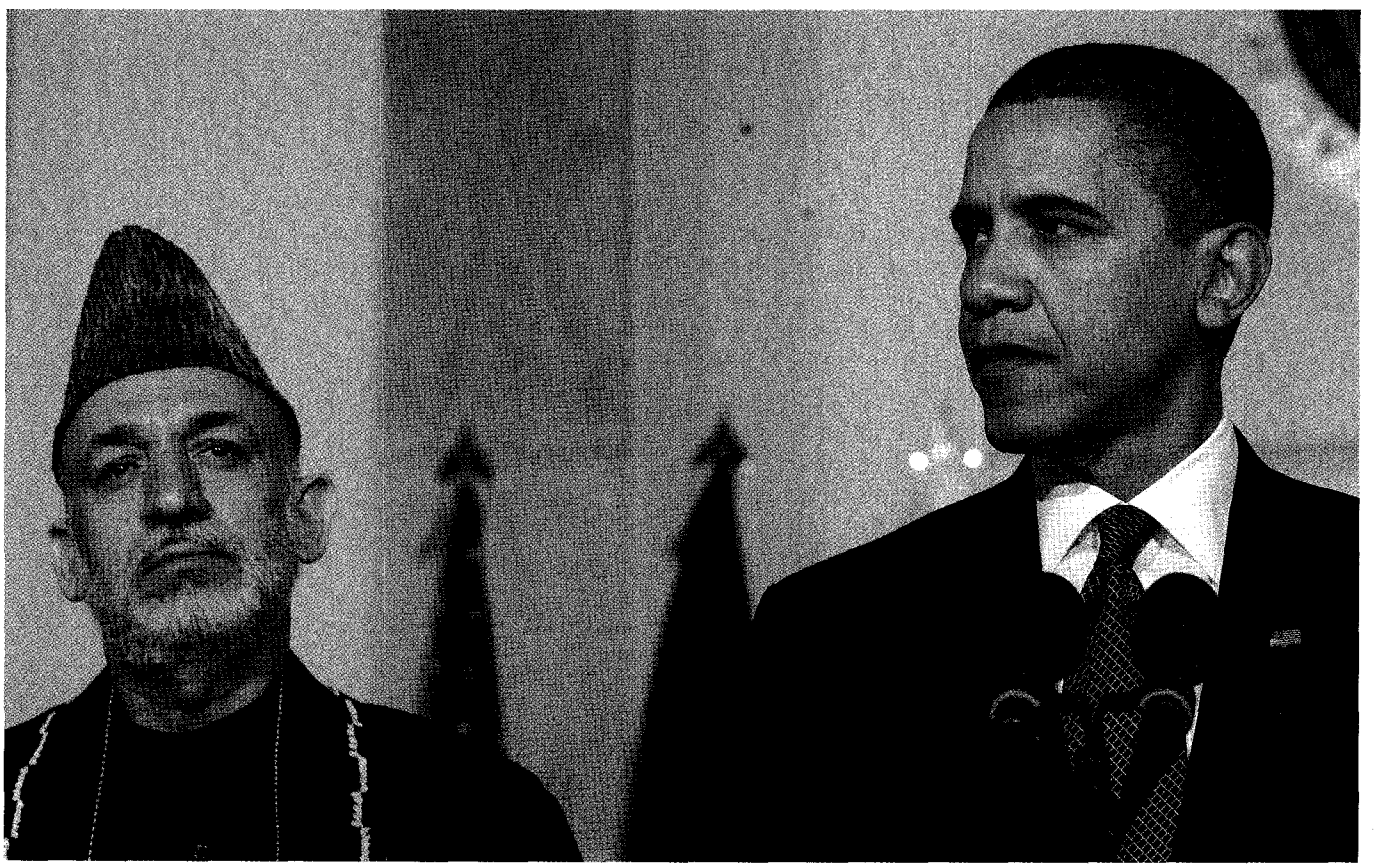
what we paid for with this on-the-cheap approach: since 2001 the Taliban has reemerged, and fused ideologically and tactically with al-Qaeda. The new Taliban has adopted wholesale al-Qaeda's Iraq playbook of suicide attacks, IED operations, hostage beheadings, and aggressive video-based information campaigns. (The pre-9/11 Taliban had, of course, banned television.)

Why should we believe that the alternative offered by the Obama administration—committing large numbers of boots on the ground and significant sums of money to Afghanistan—has a better chance of success? In part, because the Afghan people themselves, the center of gravity in a counterinsurgency, are rooting for us to win. BBC/ABC polling found that 58 percent of Afghans named the Taliban—who only 7 percent of Afghans view favorably—as the greatest threat to their nation; only 8 percent said it was the United States.

There are other positive indices. Refugees don't return to places they don't think have a future, and more than four million Afghan refugees have returned home since the fall of the Taliban. (By contrast, about the same number of Iraqi refugees fled their homes after the American-led invasion of their country in 2003, and few have returned.) There are also more than two million Afghan kids in schools, including, of course, many girls. Music, kites, movies, independent newspapers, and TV stations—all of which were banned under the Taliban—are now ubiquitous. One in six Afghans now has a cell phone, in a country that didn't have a phone system under the Taliban. And, according to the World Bank, the 2007 GDP growth rate for Afghanistan was 14 percent. Under Taliban rule the country was so poor that the World Bank didn't even bother to measure its economic indicators.

Today 40 percent of Afghans say their country is going in the right direction (only 17 percent of Americans felt the same way in the waning months of the Bush administration). Considering Afghanistan's rampant drug trade, pervasive corruption, and rising violence, this may seem counterintuitive—until you recall that no country in the world has ever suffered Afghanistan's combination of an invasion and occupation by a totalitarian regime followed by a civil war, with subsequent "government" by warlords and then the neo-medieval misrule of the Taliban. In other words, the bar is pretty low. No Afghan is expecting that the country will turn into, say, Belgium, but there is an expectation that Afghanistan can be returned to the somewhat secure condition it enjoyed in the 1970s before the Soviet invasion, and that the country will be able to grow its way out of being simply a subsistence agricultural economy.



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Obama's Afghanistan strategy is well poised to deliver on these expectations because it primarily emphasizes increased security for the Afghan people—the first public good that Afghans want. In the south of Afghanistan, where the insurgency is the most intense, the U.S. is deploying two Marine brigades and a Stryker brigade, 17,000 soldiers in all, to supplement the thinly stretched British, Dutch, and Canadian forces in the region. These are not the kind of units that do peacekeeping; they will go in and clear areas of the Taliban and, most crucially, hold them. This will be a major improvement in a region where NATO forces have often had enough manpower to clear areas but not to hold them. One Western diplomat in Kabul joked grimly to me that every year in the south NATO soldiers have gone in to "mow the lawn." This time the idea is not to let the grass grow back.

One potential objection to Obama's Afghanistan strategy is that the thousands of additional American soldiers that are now deploying to the country will only be the thin end of the wedge, because the Pentagon will inevitably ask for significantly more troops. This is a reasonable concern, but should be obviated by the fact that dramatically scaling up the size of the Afghan army and police is the best American exit strategy from the country, and that effort is at the heart of Obama's plan.

Today there are only some 160,000 Afghan soldiers and cops, a quarter of the size of Iraq's security services, and they are tasked with bringing order to a country that is larger and more populous than Iraq. Obama wants to modestly improve the size and professionalism of Afghanistan's police force, and almost double the ranks of the Afghan army over the next two years. The latter is especially important because Afghans trust their army more than any other institution, and the army has emerged as a truly national force not riven by ethnic divisions. To help train those Afghan security services, some 4,000 trainers from the 82nd Airborne are deploying to Afghanistan. The administration is also pushing to make salaries in those forces competitive with what the Taliban pays its foot soldiers—often three times what an Afghan policeman makes.

Another possible objection to the introduction of more U.S. soldiers into Afghanistan is that, inevitably, they will kill more civilians, the main issue that angers Afghans about the foreign military presence. In fact, the presence of more boots on the ground is likely to *reduce* civilian casualties, because historically it has been the overreliance on American air strikes—as a result of too few ground forces—which has been the key cause of civilian deaths. According to the U.S. Air Force, between January and August 2008 there were almost 2,400 air strikes in Afghanistan, fully three times as many as in Iraq. And the United Nations concluded that it was air strikes, rather than action on the ground, which were responsible for the largest percentage—64 percent—of civilian deaths attributed to pro-government forces in 2008.

Cognizant of the importance of the issue of civilian casualties, in his Senate confirmation hearing in June the new commander in Afghanistan, Lt. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, testified that their avoidance "may be the critical point" of American military operations, adding, "I cannot overstate my commitment to the importance of this concept." McChrystal, generally regarded as one of the most effective officers of his generation, has now put the avoidance of civilian casualties at the core of his military strategy in Afghanistan, and that message will undoubtedly filter down the chain of command.

These key features of the Obama administration's Afghan policy are supplemented by several others that merit highlighting and represent a distinct break from the Bush administration's sputtering efforts. One is a shifting emphasis within the attempt to curtail the opium trade, from poppy eradication to going after the drug lords. This is a no-brainer—poppy eradication penalizes poor Afghan farmers who can't pay the bribes to ensure their fields are not eradicated, and who are then easy marks for Taliban recruitment. Obama is also seeking to draw in potential regional partners like Iran, which played a vital role in the formation of the first Afghan government that emerged out of the discussions in Bonn in the winter of 2001. And third, the U.S. government plans to regularly host meetings among key Afghan and Pakistani officials, as it did in Washington in February and May. This is important for confidence-building measures between Afghans and Pakistanis, whose relations have varied between icy and openly hostile.

Skeptics of Obama's Afghanistan policy say that the right approach is to either reduce American commitments there or just get out entirely. The short explanation of why this won't work is that the United States has tried this already—twice.

This brings us to the one skunk at this garden party, and it is a rather large one: Afghanistan's nuclear-armed, al-Qaeda- and Taliban-headquartering neighbor to the east. The Pakistani dimension of Obama's Af-Pak strategy is his critics' most reasonable objection to his plans for the region. It is difficult for the United States to have an effective strategy for Pakistan when *Pakistan* doesn't have an

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effective strategy for Pakistan. There is a set of interwoven problems that the country must face if it is to effectively confront the militants in its own territory. If it fails to do this, the regional insurgency that encompasses both sides of the Afghanistan/Pakistan border will continue to gather strength.

The first problem is that Pakistan effectively has two governments. There is a weak, elected civilian one, and a strong, unelected military one. Pakistan's civilian government knows little about military strategy and is often at odds with the army, which has veto power over all aspects of national security policy. Pakistan's army, meanwhile, has wavered ineffectually between mounting punitive expeditions against the militants and appeasing them, and is generally unable or unwilling to adopt an effective strategy against the Taliban. (The recent operations in the Swat Valley, characterized by the use of artillery and air power and millions of refugees streaming out of the battle zone, are not the hallmarks of a successful counterinsurgency.) As a result, civilians caught in the middle don't know which way the wind will blow from day to day. They have reason to be skeptical that the government will protect them from the predations of the Taliban if the former chooses to revisit the various "peace" agreements it has struck with the militants over the past several years. Finally, the Pakistani establishment has done a poor job of persuading the public that the Taliban and other militant groups to which it once gave succor, and which are now attacking the Pakistani state, pose a grave threat to Pakistan itself.

The U.S. gets a higher approval rating in Afghanistan than in any other Muslim country save Lebanon. What Afghans want is not for American soldiers to leave, but for them to deliver on their promises of helping to midwife a more secure and prosperous country.

Some have argued that if the U.S. does succeed in Afghanistan, it will only make this situation worse, pushing the Taliban and their allied foreign fighters into Pakistan and further destabilizing the already rickety nuclear-armed state. But this line of reasoning has the equation precisely the wrong way around: al-Qaeda was founded in Pakistan in 1988, and many of the Taliban's leaders and foot soldiers emerged out of Pakistani madrassas and refugee camps. Following the vacuum created by the Afghan civil war of the early 1990s, the Pakistan-based militants expanded into Afghanistan. The notion of the militants enjoying safe havens in either Afghanistan or Pakistan is a false choice—in truth, they have had a persistent presence in both countries for decades.

That said, there are some hopeful signs that the militants have shot themselves in the feet in Pakistan. There has been no single "9/11 moment," but the cumulative weight of a number of events—the Taliban's assassination of Benazir Bhutto; al-Qaeda's bombing of the Marriott hotel in Islamabad; the attacks on the visiting Sri Lankan cricket team and the police academy in Lahore; the widely circulated video images of the Taliban flogging a seventeen-year-old girl; and the Taliban's decision to move from Swat into Buner District, only sixty miles from Islamabad—has accomplished something similar. Each of these incidents has provoked revulsion and fear among the Pakistani public. Indicative of this, the alliance of pro-Taliban religious parties known as the MMA was annihilated in the 2008 election, earning just 2 percent of the vote. And support for suicide bombing among Pakistanis has cratered, from 33 percent in 2002 to 5 percent in 2008.

The United States can neither precipitously withdraw from Afghanistan nor help foster the emergence of a stable Afghan state by doing it on the cheap; the consequence would be the return of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Fortunately, the U.S. is not alone; unlike in Iraq, there is an international coalition of forty-two countries in Afghanistan supporting NATO efforts there, with troops or other assistance. Even Muslim countries are part of this mix. Turkey, for instance, ran the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan in 2005, and the United Arab Emirates and Jordan have both sent small numbers of soldiers.

The United States overthrew the Taliban in the winter of 2001. It has a moral obligation to ensure that when it does leave Afghanistan it does so secure in the knowledge that the country will never again be a launching pad for the world's deadliest terrorist groups, and that the country is on the way to a measure of stability and prosperity. When that happens, it is not too fanciful to think that Afghanistan's majestic mountains, verdant valleys, and jasmine-scented gardens may once again draw the tourists that once flocked there. WM

Peter Bergen is a senior fellow at the New America Foundation and a frequent visitor to Afghanistan since 1993.

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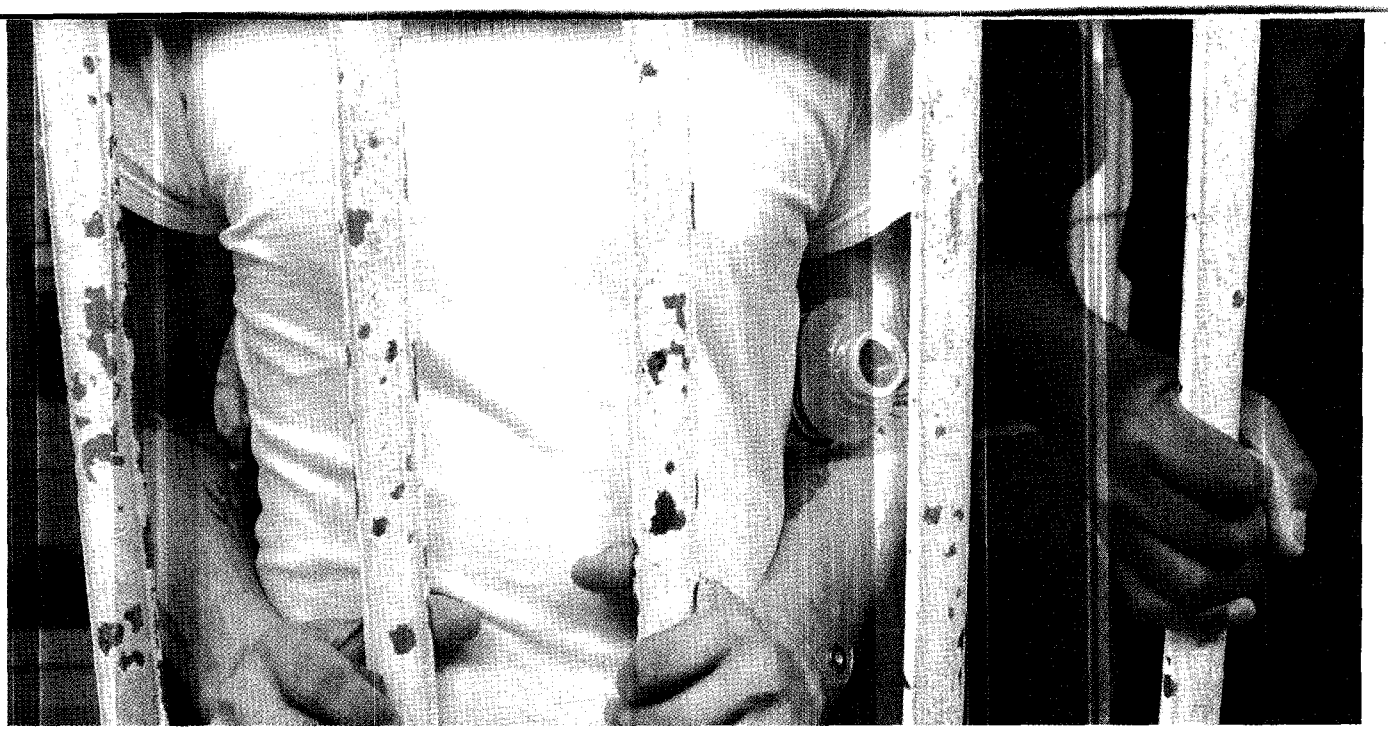

Jail Break

How smarter parole and probation can cut the nation's incarceration rate.

By Mark A. R. Kleiman

In 2004, Judge Steven Alm was assigned to the felony trial court for the island of Oahu, Hawaii. Alm quickly realized that he had a problem. Probation officers for his court were overwhelmed with clients who kept using methamphetamine, Hawaii's number-one problem drug. It wasn't exactly difficult to pass the drug tests, which were scheduled weeks in advance. But on any given day 10 percent of the probationers scheduled to come in didn't arrive for testing, and 20 percent of those who did show up tested "dirty." By the time probationers were sent to Alm's court for a revocation hearing, they had already racked up multiple breaches of the rules.

Hawaii's felony probationers have lengthy sentences hanging over their heads. An offender whose probation is revoked can be sent to prison for the rest of his term—anywhere from five to twenty years. To Alm and his fellow judges, this seemed an unnecessarily draconian response to a missed or "dirty" drug test. It was also impractical in light of Hawaii's prison-overcrowding problem. (Not only are Hawaii's own prisons full; the state also pays heavily to send thousands of its prisoners to for-profit prisons on the mainland.)

As a former career prosecutor and U.S. attorney, Alm had more than a little political clout and was accustomed to getting results. Why, he asked the probation officers, was he only hearing about drug problems when they spiraled out of control? If this was the tenth violation, what happened the first nine times?

The probation officers explained that each one of them had responsibility for at least eighty-five felons. (That was for those with "high-risk" caseloads; the other probation officers had caseloads twice that size.) Most of those offenders sporadically fell afoul of the rules. The officers couldn't possibly spend two hours writing a report every time a probationer failed a test or skipped drug treatment or anger-management class—there would be no time for anything else. As the officers saw it, their job was to harangue those clients who would listen to get back into line, and refer those who wouldn't listen back to court after they had accumulated enough offenses to justify sending them away.

Alm could see the logic of the system, but he didn't think it was the right kind of logic. "You wouldn't raise a child that way," he told the officers. "You wouldn't train a puppy that way. You'd establish clear rules and have immediate consequences for breaking them."

So Alm devised a new plan. He asked the probation officers to select a group of seemingly incorrigible scofflaws, probationers just one slipup shy of a revocation hearing. Every time one of them missed or flunked a drug test (or

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broke any other probation rule) he would land in court—and in jail—right away. Alm enlisted the help of prosecutors and public defenders to ensure that a hearing could be held within forty-eight hours of a violation. He corralled the federal fugitive task force to chase down anyone who refused to come into court. To cut down on paperwork, he eliminated the long report, documenting a long history of misconduct, that had previously been required from a probation officer before a revocation hearing. In its place, he substituted a two-page fill-in-the-blanks form, which dealt with only a single missed or dirty test or other violation.

Then, instead of "revoking" probation and condemning the offender to years in prison, Alm would "modify" probation, sending the offender to jail for a few days and then releasing him back to probation supervision. Alm reasoned that a brief stint behind bars would make the probationer more cooperative when he returned to his officer's caseload.

The probation officers feared that Alm's proposal would be impossibly burdensome, but they agreed to give it a try. Alm held a contest among the officers to name the program, and the winning entry was "Hawaii's Opportunity Probation with Enforcement," or HOPE.

HOPE started with thirty-four chronic violators. On the advice of the public defender, Alm brought them into court for what he called a "warning hearing," with the defense counsel and the prosecutor present. He explained that, for them, the era of warnings was over. "If you fail a drug test, if you fail to meet with your probation officer when you are supposed to, or you fail with other terms of your probation ... you will go to jail," runs Alm's script for such proceedings. "All of your actions in life have consequences, good or bad." Later, Alm added a new twist to the program: random drug testing, with each probationer required to call in to a hotline every weekday morning to learn whether that was his day to be tested.

Everyone braced for a flood of missed and failed tests and the consequent sanctions hearings. But then something strange happened: in the first two weeks, only five of the thirty-four broke the rules. The overall rate of missed and failed drug tests dropped by more than 80 percent. Before the program started, the HOPE group had more than twice the noncompliance rate of the comparison group; that's how they were chosen. HOPE reversed that picture, with program participants testing positive at less than one-quarter the rate of the comparison group. The high level of compliance made the workload perfectly manageable for everyone involved, and Alm was able to expand HOPE to 135 probationers without hiring more people.

Despite tighter monitoring and "zero-tolerance" sanctioning, HOPE participants averaged about the same number of days in jail as the comparison group: about twenty days over the course of a year. But they had only a third as many revocations and were sentenced to only a third as much prison time: on average, 110 days per probationer, as compared to 300 days.

Then Hawaii expanded the program, and it kept working. Angela Hawken—a professor at Pepperdine University's public-policy school who did much of the evaluation work on California's much-less-successful Proposition 36 diversion program—and I have been studying both the original program and its expansion; for the expansion, Hawken managed to persuade the authorities in Hawaii to run a full randomized controlled trial, where otherwise similar probationers were chosen by lot either to be assigned to HOPE or to go on probation as usual. The picture remained the same: the HOPE group had much less drug use and spent much less time behind bars. The program worked as well in the hands of other judges as it did with Judge Alm's original group. Some judges were more severe than average, others less so, but the success rates among their probationers were all about equal. It turns out that two days behind bars works as well as six weeks, as long as the two days are imposed quickly and consistently.

The program hasn't been big enough for long enough to have made a dent in the city's crime statistics or the size of the citywide meth market. But HOPE probationers get arrested less than half as often, and for less serious crimes, than those under traditional probation. The reason may be that the HOPE participants are getting off drugs, which makes them less likely to steal to support their habits and more likely to get and keep jobs. Or it may be simply that they are leading more structured lives. In any event, it's clear that HOPE reduces crime among those assigned to it.

Judge Steven Alm was accustomed to getting results. Why, he asked the probation officers, was he only hearing about felony probationers' drug problems when they spiraled out of control? If this was the tenth violation, what happened the first nine times?

In addition, HOPE has achieved something rare in the American criminal justice system, proving that it is actually possible to enforce the conditions of "community corrections" programs: probation and its cousin, parole. (Probationers are offenders who have been placed under supervision instead of being sent to prison; parol-

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ees are monitored in the community after serving part of their prison term.) This discovery has major policy implications. After twenty-five years of "tough on crime" orthodoxy, American politicians are urgently searching for workable alternatives to mass incarceration. The fiscal crisis has state governments scrambling to pay for prison systems that take a bigger share of state budgets than anything but health care and education. Senator Jim Webb is seeking to enact major criminal-justice reforms, reasoning that a system that holds one in 100 adults behind bars and has a 60 percent recidivism rate could probably be improved. Yet while mass incarceration has been under criticism, scant attention has been devoted to the inadequacies of the alternatives, probation and parole. In every state those systems are woefully underfunded and overburdened, unable to enforce their own rules or to prevent most of their clients from sliding back into criminal life. All of the other "community corrections" options—drug diversion programs, treatment courts, community service, home detention—depend on the probation system for their enforcement. As long as probation remains ineffective, any requirement imposed on an offender by the court is, in reality, no more than a helpful hint.

When Alm's program began, everyone braced for the worst. But then something strange happened: in the first two weeks, only five of the thirty-four probationers broke the rules. The overall rate of missed and failed drug tests fell by 80 percent.

Without a functioning community-corrections system, the current enthusiasm for prison reform is likely to wither and fade. That's what makes Judge Alm's Hawaiian experiment so important. The biggest and cheapest opportunity to lower both incarceration and crime rates is to transform probation from a minor nuisance to the probationer into a real system of "outpatient corrections," capable of monitoring and reforming the behavior of vast numbers of offenders.

A solid body of social science and criminological research dating back to the eighteenth century tells us that behavior can be changed by punishment that is certain and swift even if it is not severe. Conversely, if punishments for wrongdoing are sporadic and delayed, increasing severity has only modest impact. That's why quintupling the prison and jail population has failed to get us back to the crime rates of the early 1960s. (Averaged across major crime categories, current rates are about 250 percent of 1962 rates.) The importance of swift and predictable consequences is plain common sense, understood by every parent. But that lesson has not been incorporated into our corrections system.

Part of the problem is scarce resources. For all the attention prison growth has received, the largest area of expansion in American corrections is the sentenced population that is not in prison or jail. There are currently around four million people on probation in the United States, twice as many as the number behind bars. However, the probation system receives only 13 percent of the total corrections budget, and while prison spending has increased year by year, spending on parole and probation has remained stagnant. With only one probation officer for about 150 clients in large cities, the enforcement of alternative punishments is usually nominal at best. Probationers always have the option of ignoring the rules: not doing assigned community service, not paying fines, dropping out of drug treatment. In California, more than 75 percent of people who opt for drug treatment instead of incarceration under Proposition 36 never start treatment at all or drop out early, without facing any consequences. Over the years, there have been many attempts to address these failings with innovative programs, drug courts being one of the best known. But participation in drug courts is voluntary, and in most jurisdictions is restricted to offenders with no history of violent crime. And a system that requires drug treatment for every participant, plus regular meetings between the client, the judge, the prosecutor, the defense counsel, the probation officer, and the treatment provider, doesn't come cheap. Two decades after the introduction of drug courts, they cover fewer than 100,000 people at any given time. Expansion is limited by the supply of drug court judges and drug treatment services, and by the sheer expense; on average, a drug court costs nearly $4,000 per participant per year, about four times as much as routine probation supervision, and about twice as much as HOPE.

The HOPE program works on opposite principles. It is mandatory, not voluntary. It targets the most challenging offenders and is open to any probationer whatever his previous criminal record. Where drug court aims to get the offender into treatment, HOPE's punishments and rewards are all designed around the objective of actually stopping offenders from using illegal drugs.

HOPE participants are only ordered into treatment if several stints in jail have failed to work. This has several benefits. By then, the probationer knows he needs the treatment program, because he has been unable to stop using even under the threat of instant jail time. And he

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knows he needs to succeed, because if he fails he faces prison. This process—which Angela Hawken calls "behavioral triage"—keeps the number of treatment clients down to a level at which each one can receive intensive help. In California, seven out of eight Proposition 36 clients are sent to outpatient drug therapy, the least intensive (and therefore cheapest, in the very short run) but also the least effective treatment approach. (Even those Prop 36 clients who complete treatment—about one in four—commit new crimes at about the same rate as comparable offenders in California did before Prop 36 became law.) Only about 10 percent of HOPE probationers are required to undergo treatment, but they usually wind up either in far more intensive and effective outpatient programs or in residential programs.

This targeted use of resources means that HOPE could be expanded to mass scale. HOPE is economical with hearings as well: they happen only when a client fails or misses a test or violates some other probation rule. Those hearings, because they focus on a single, simple, recent event—a missed appointment or positive drug test—are almost always uncontested and therefore quick: the median hearing time is just under seven and half minutes. HOPE has expanded to include more than 1,250 felony probationers on Oahu—about one out of six—from all ten felony courtrooms on the island, without hiring any new judges or clerks or building any new courtrooms. The total annual cost of the expansion was $1.2 million, about $1,000 per probationer per year, which was spent on hiring additional drug testers and paying for treatment services.

Perhaps the most striking finding of the evaluation is the enthusiasm of the probation officers, the defense lawyers, and the probationers themselves. Probation officers, once highly skeptical, have become fervent fans as they've discovered the exhilaration of being able to exercise in practice the authority over their clients that they possess in theory. The probationers, too—even those interviewed in jail while serving sanctions time—appreciate the program's clarity and transparent fairness. The language the HOPE clients use when they talk about the process is striking: instead of concentrating on what was done to them by the probation officer or the judge, they concentrate on their own actions. "Judge Alm is strict, but he's fair," one prisoner told me. "You know exactly where you stand." Another probationer, interviewed in jail while serving a short stay for a positive drug test, said, "I'm going to try to make my first mistake my last."

Image Source

If we want to end the era of mass incarceration and replace it with a regime of less punishment and less crime, drug testing is only one of the ways to apply the cen-

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tral lesson of HOPE: that clearly communicated threats of swift, certain punishment really can change behavior, even when the punishment is modest. By thinking creatively, we could transform the entire range of community-based punishments into effective alternatives to incarceration. That would have a profound impact on offenders' lives, on the number of people behind bars, and on the crime rate.

Imagine, for instance, if a probationer or parolee were issued with an anklet fitted with a miniature GPS receiver and cell phone transmitter, with a sensor to detect if the anklet had been removed or tampered with. That device could report continuously on its—and therefore the offender's—location. That would make it significantly harder for probationers or parolees to get away with any new offenses, since the record of where they had been could be matched against crime reports. Such a device would also allow probation and parole officers to impose, and enforce, terms such as curfews, stay-away orders, or requirements to show up to work on time, in the same way that Alm enforces the no-drug-use rule in Hawaii.

Behavior can be changed by punishment that is certain and swift even if it is not severe, and rarely by harsher punishment that is sporadic and delayed. That's why quintupling the incarcerated population hasn't returned us to the crime rates of the early 1960s.

HOPE plus position monitoring could provide much of the deterrence and incapacitation of a prison cell at a small fraction of the cost in money and suffering. For $3,000 per year, a HOPE-style mix of probation, drug testing, sanctions, and treatment only as needed, plus GPS monitoring, could deliver something like 80 percent of the crime-prevention benefits of a prison cell that costs ten times as much. With such a system in place, judges would have a real alternative to incarceration. And so would the governors who are thinking about letting prisoners out to save money. Today, two-thirds of those who leave prison will be back within three years; the exit from a prison is a revolving door. For felony probationers, the incarceration rate within three years is about 50 percent. If the "outpatient prison" could do for recidivism among parolees what HOPE did for new crimes by probationers, five years from now we could have many fewer people in prison than we do today, and half as much crime.

We could also greatly improve economic opportunities for those with criminal records. One of the reasons people return to a life of crime is that it's hard for them to find jobs. Many employers think, not unreasonably, that ex-offenders are often unreliable workers, and that their lawbreaking may not be a thing of the past. A scheme that offered drug testing, position monitoring, and immediate consequences for breaking the rules could change that calculation for employers, much to the benefit of former offenders trying to go straight.

The next step is to try out HOPE-style programs—not slavish imitations, but adaptations suited to local conditions—in as many jurisdictions as possible. It's far too soon to get locked into a single program design. Some of the new efforts should involve probation, others should deal with current parolees, still others should be tied to early-prison-release programs. Some should be run by judges, others by probation or parole departments. Some should focus on drug testing while others add position monitoring. California Congressman Adam Schiff is now preparing legislation to create a grant program for that purpose. If the programs work, they will more than pay for themselves by reducing prison headcounts, so the federal government shouldn't have to provide anything but guidance and seed money. The key is to get states committed to plowing prison savings into community-corrections programs that keep citizens safe and offenders out of the slammer.

Perhaps the biggest potential obstacle to the successful expansion of HOPE is impatience. Some years ago, Maryland tried a similar effort, called Break the Cycle, and started the program at full scale, with 17,000 probationers. There was no formal warning for offenders and no buy-in from judges. Random drug testing alone reduced drug use, but the sanctions part of the system never worked. When a probationer who had seventy-two violations but had never been sanctioned killed a cop, the program crashed and burned.

So Alm has two words of advice for other judges who want to imitate HOPE: "Start small!" It isn't hard to expand a successful program. What's hard is fixing a program once it's gotten off to an unsuccessful start and its threats have lost credibility among offenders. We all want to get up to speed, but you need to learn to walk before you start to run. WM

Mark A. R. Kleiman is professor of public policy at UCLA and the editor of the *Journal of Drug Policy Analysis*. He is the author of *Against Excess: Drug Policy for Results*. This article is drawn from his new book, *When Brute Force Fails: How to Have Less Crime and Less Punishment*, to be published by Princeton University Press this summer.

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Golden Erring

Once the embodiment of America's possibilities, California has become the embodiment of the country's delusions.

By T. A. Frank

Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950–1963 (Americans and the California Dream)
by Kevin Starr
Oxford University Press, 576 pp.

How did we manage to have it all in the years after the Second World War—car, house, health care, affordable education, Social Security, rising wages, leisure—and where did it go? If anyone knows, please tell California. Things seemed to be going so well here a half century ago: unemployment rates just above 3 percent, swimming pools in every backyard, baseball teams poached from Brooklyn, matchless public schools and universities, and swift new highways. Good jobs were available to nearly anyone who came, and nearly everyone did.

It all seems awfully remote. Today's California—reckless spender in the booms, feckless cutter in the busts, thoughtless booster of every bubble, mindless indulger of spoiled interest groups, and senseless elector of weak public officials—looks wan and sickly. Its schools are shabby, its traffic relentless, its social services overwhelmed, its prisons disgraceful, and its bond rating comical. Once the embodiment of American possibilities, California has become the embodiment of American delusions. Only with a great recession and a budget deficit of over $24 billion has it been forced to an economic reckoning, one that will be brutal for the poor and the elderly. There's talk of a federal bailout, which, in light of far greater sums received by AIG, seems almost defensible, especially to those of us who live here. But it's a long shot.

Under such grim circumstances, one must welcome a book on California at its pinnacle of wealth and self-assurance, when healthier habits of living and governance prevailed. In a well-timed effort, Kevin Starr, peerless historian of the Golden State, has published a 538-page volume entitled *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950–1963*. Starr's book, his eighth in the California Dream series, is painstaking and comprehensive, thorough in chronicling the names and ideas of the age. It's an affectionate look back at the good times and a helpful reminder of the bad ones. If much was sweet about those years, much also was not.

But let's start with what was sweet. Starr offers a 1940s snapshot of the Loeffler family—fire department engineer Leroy, his wife Joyce, and their two young daughters—who lived on Leroy's salary of $3,000 a year, the rough equivalent of $36,000 in today's money. Such an income allowed the Loefflers to have a washing machine, refrigerator, stove, backyard patio, and automobile. They also had a two-bedroom, two-fireplace bungalow in Glendale, purchased for $7,800 (or about $93,000 in today's dollars), with monthly mortgage payments of $37.50. Citrus trees grew in the backyard. Trips to the beach were frequent.

The Loefflers were hardly alone in their good fortune. The postwar Californian enjoyed plentiful space and newfound leisure. Vast suburbs arose, inspiring widespread derision from intellectuals and aesthetes yet giving pleasure to the millions who settled in them. Golf came to the middle class in the form of scores of municipal courses with low fees. Public beaches were easy to reach and reliably sunny. Polynesian-themed restaurants thrived, offering generous selections of steak-based fare accompanied by cocktails served in co-

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conuts. Bowling alleys were rarely more than a few throws away. Cars abounded.

It was an era of grand public works. As of 1950, Sacramento was funding highway construction at a rate of $100 million a year, and by 1962 the Division of Highways was spending over $600 million a year (equivalent to more than $4 billion today). In 1960, the state adopted the Master Plan for Higher Education, setting the stage for the construction of three new general campuses for the University of California system, four new general campuses for the Cal State system, and twenty-two new campuses for community colleges. And then there was water, ever scarce, always treasured, the key to transforming parched, empty valleys into cities, gardens, and agricultural abundance. In 1960, Governor Pat Brown persuaded voters to authorize a $1.75 billion bond issue to fund what was called the State Water Project, a vast assemblage of dams, pumping stations, aqueducts, and reservoirs that would bring millions of gallons of northern water to the thirsty south. Starr calls it the "most ambitious water storage and distribution system in the history of the human race."

For all the blessings of California life, however, many of them rested on rickety foundations. Much of the prosperity could be traced directly to Washington, which was briskly arming up for the Cold War. Thanks to Pentagon largesse, fully 400,000 Californians found desirable jobs at companies such as Douglas Aircraft and Lockheed. By 1963, nearly 30 percent of the Los Angeles County–Orange County economy depended on defense spending. Many Californians recognized the hazards of relying so heavily on the business of armaments, but few had the heart to do anything about it. As Starr writes, signs of thaws in U.S.-Soviet relations, such as Nikita Khrushchev's visit in 1959, tended to throw the region into "economic panic."

Growth exacted a serious environmental price as well, and not merely in terms of air or water or furry creatures. Many Californians with older attachments to the land mourned the broader toll being taken on their surroundings by the population boom: the riot of tacky construction, the crowding, and the mindless pace of it all. Gone—or fast going—were the ranchlands of Porter Ranch, the orange groves of Orange County, and the redwoods of the redwood forests. San Francisco Bay continued to experience land "reclamation," which meant the filling in of any parts that could be filled in. An unsentimental 1959 report from the Army Corps of Engineers estimated that the process would be complete by 2020, with the bay reduced in size to a channel. Only an impassioned campaign by influential San Franciscans was able—barely—to halt such "progress."

By the early 1960s, California's success was the source of national and international fascination but also skepticism. In 1963, *Esquire* held a symposium entitled "California: Too Much, Too Soon." Many in the state would have agreed. With a population of only two million in 1900, California had grown to ten million by 1950, fifteen million by 1960, and twenty million by 1970. For policymakers like Pat Brown, eager to surpass New York State on all fronts, the influx became an end in itself. As farms disappeared, freeways encouraged sprawl, which encouraged more freeways. And the State Water Project, Pat Brown's baby, was most fateful of all. Opponents of the effort had argued that adding more water to Southern California would not only encourage overdevelopment but also generate further need for water. Their voices went unheeded. It's crowded now in Southern California. Far from the coasts, water pipes feed homes that blanket the deserts and arid hills of the Inland Empire, and the inhabitants emerge each day to brave the heaving, crawling freeways. We are far removed from the easier rhythms of the Loefflers.

One of the more striking chapters of Starr's book concerns race relations. No one needs to be reminded that things weren't ideal a few decades ago, but the extent of our backwardness then is still stunning. It was not in Mississippi or Alabama but in California that eight-year-old Mexican American Sylvia Mendez could show up for an all-white public school in Orange County in 1945 and be turned away, told by administrators that only her two lighter-skinned cousins would be permitted to attend. (Sylvia was instead directed to the school for Mexican Americans.) It was in California that Dena Perez tried to marry Sylvester Scott Davis Jr. in 1947. She was Mexican American, he was black, and Los Angeles County refused to grant the couple a license, citing Section 69 of the California Civil Code, which forbade marriage between a white person (for which Perez was light enough to qualify) and a "Negro, Mulatto, Mongolian, or member of the Malay race." And it was in supposedly liberal San Francisco, in 1957, that newly arrived center fielder Willie Mays found himself turned down for a house purchase in an all-white neighborhood. For all of our troubles today, we're not that country—or state—anymore.

Today, California has a dizzying mix of cultures and peoples. Defense contracting is no longer the backbone of Southern California. Sushi bars have replaced Tiki bars. Mulattos can marry Mongolians. The air is cleaner. Preservation and conservation are prized. Most of these changes have been very beneficial. But not all of them. The good life here has grown more elusive, with forty million Californians now jostling for a patch of green and a sliver of the abundance. Many emigrate in failure and, increasingly, do so having left behind a hulking, bank-owned villa. California will almost certainly recover and thrive again one day, but the ease with which a hopeful American once could find a new start here and prosper is unlikely to return. It was a lucky twenty years.

Kevin Starr writes engagingly, steering blessedly clear of jargon or pretension. If he betrays a certain degree of haste—some variant of "paradox" or "paradoxical" seems to show up every few pages or so, for instance—it's a minor fault in light of the sheer scope of the undertaking. (Let those who have managed to write eight-volume histories cast the first stone.) This is a grand effort, much like the public works of the era it chronicles, and we're lucky to have it. Now Starr will have to focus on the latest installment, the one in which California runs out of money and nearly ceases to function. I hope it has a happy, or at least bearable, ending. WM

T. A. Frank is an Irvine Fellow at the New America Foundation and an editor of the *Washington Monthly*.

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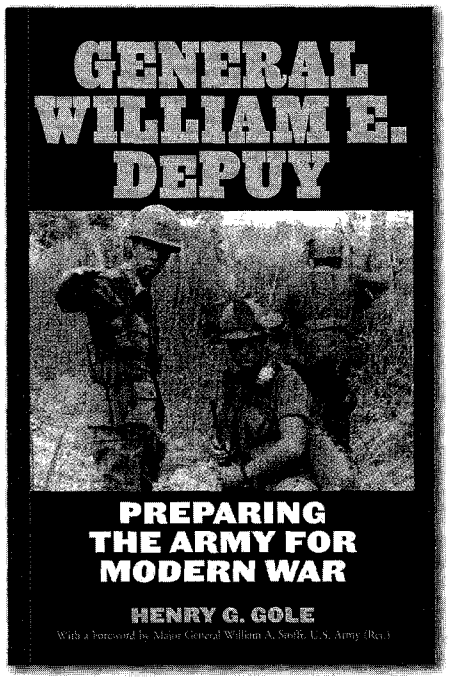
Forgotten Warrior

Unknown outside the military, General William DePuy may have been the most influential soldier since World War II.

By Thomas E. Ricks



General William E. DePuy: Preparing the Army for Modern War

By Henry G. Gole
University Press of Kentucky, 364 pp.

In a better, fairer world, Henry Gole's terrific biography of Gen. William DePuy, with its epic sweep from World War II to the post-Vietnam Army, would be known as well as Neil Sheehan's *A Bright and Shining Lie*.

DePuy was a consummate soldier who fought in Normandy in World War II and commanded the 1st Infantry Division in Vietnam. Among military insiders, he is best known for his pathbreaking work to fix the Army after it was broken by Vietnam. As Gole, himself a veteran of the wars in Korea and Vietnam, puts it in this book, some admiring officers described him as "the greatest soldier of his generation, the most influential soldier since World War II." DePuy was a genuine American hero, but he is barely known to the American public, and that is a shame.

DePuy's defining moment was the horrific summer of 1944, when an amateurish American military learned lessons the hard way against the Germans. Forget about *Saving Private Ryan*, with its fantasy of a handful of American soldiers blocking superior German forces in improvised street fighting. The real deal was that the Army General Eisenhower threw into Normandy, for better or worse, was undertrained and all too often horribly led. Almost all the pre-invasion preparation was about getting to the beach, with little taught about what to do after crossing it. Many officers knew more about how to transport troops in trucks than about how to lead them in combat. Gole notes that even data from the previous two years of fighting Germans in North Africa and Italy was largely ignored.

The price paid was huge, and collected swiftly. "In the first six weeks of the battle in Normandy, the 90th [the division in which DePuy served] lost 100 percent of its soldiers and 150 percent of its officers," DePuy later wrote, with replacements arriving daily in battalion-sized batches. To the humiliation of the 90th Division, on July 23, 1944, one of its battalions, with 265 men, surrendered to fifty Germans with two tanks. DePuy described his own battalion commander in Normandy as being "as close to being totally incompetent as it was possible to be." As for his regimental commander, DePuy considered him "a horse's ass ... a disaster."

DePuy, by contrast, was a natural combat leader, one of those gifted amateurs who rose to the top. He went into World War II a green lieutenant who had graduated from the state university in his native South Dakota. He emerged from the war having commanded a battalion and received a series of high combat awards. He was only twenty-six years old, but he had witnessed, as Gole writes, "the price of getting it wrong." His conclusions were that war is about battle and that the way to prepare for it is to train incessantly. He was, as another general says in the book, "an authentic tactical genius." He became a great trainer.

His record in the Vietnam War was mixed at best. He brought to it his belief in avoiding frontal assaults and instead in using the infantry to find and "fix" the enemy and then using artillery and aircraft to kill the enemy. This led him into conflict with then Maj. Gen. Frederick Weyand, who commanded the adjacent division, the 25th Infantry. Weyand focused on pacification, while DePuy looked to over-

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whelm the enemy with firepower, Gole writes. Gole pulls his punches a bit here, but quotes DePuy as saying there had been too much emphasis on counterinsurgency in the Vietnam War. I came away wanting to know more about Weyand's approach, which I suspect was the more appropriate one. (Indeed, Andrew Krepinevich, in his classic study *The Army and Vietnam*, reports that DuPuy was contemptuous of the Marine Corps' CAP program, which in retrospect was a productive road not taken.)

DePuy also carried on in Vietnam another even more controversial World War II tradition—the fast, even brutal, relief of officers he deemed ineffective. During his year commanding the 1st Infantry Division, he fired an astonishing seven battalion commanders. This so bothered the chief of staff of the Army, Gen. Harold K. Johnson, that during a visit to Vietnam late in 1966 he sat down with DePuy and his assistant division commander. "You are relieving too many battalion commanders," Johnson admonished. "You are supposed to train them."

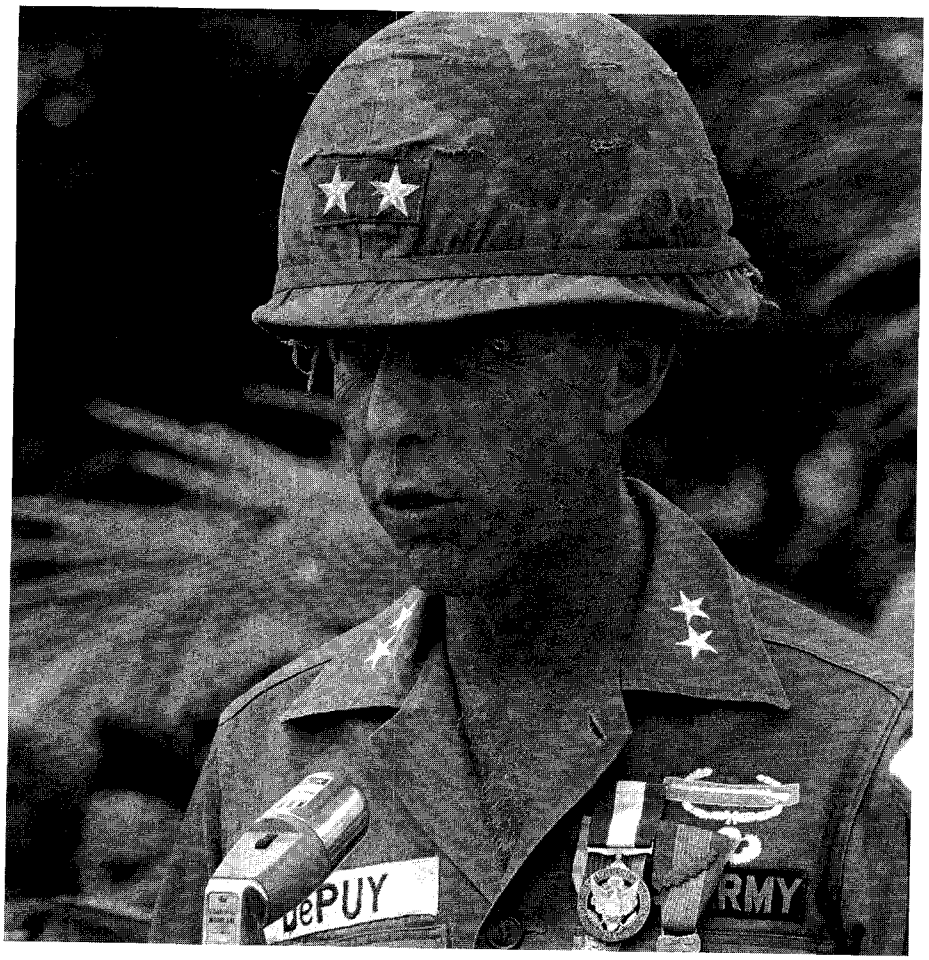
The assistant division commander shot back, "General, I had the idea that you were going to train them and we were going to fight them over here and save soldiers' lives." That sharp response was exactly right: removal of commanders may worry other officers, but it reassures soldiers, because it sends the signal that someone around here knows what he is doing, and recognizes incompetence. Nothing demoralizes soldiers faster than suspecting they are being led by a buffoon. On the other hand, DePuy's hair-trigger firings gave him a reputation as an arrogant, unforgiving tyrant.

Tough, bright, and focused, DePuy probably was exactly the right person to lead the rebuilding of the Army in the early 1970s. He emphasized to his subordinate generals that he would hold them personally responsible to produce results—which they knew, given his reputation in Vietnam, was no idle threat.

But there is an old military saying that every strength contains the seeds of its own weakness. That seems to have been the case with DePuy's hugely successful effort to reorganize, re-equip, retrain, refocus, and professionalize the post-Vietnam, post-draft Army. His approach, with its detailed attention to tactics and training, was a fine way to rebuild the Army in the late 1970s and early '80s. "We were tactical guys by self-definition and preference," DePuy said later. The effectiveness of the transformation was demonstrated in the short, purposely limited Gulf War of 1991, a conflict that seems all but forgotten now.

But his relentless focus on tactics and training has unfortunately proved to be a poor way to prepare the Army for Iraq in the 2000s. The Iraq War has not been about battle (nor was Vietnam, for that matter). It has been a war in which senior officers need not so much training, which readies them for the known, as education, which prepares them for the unknown. This is not a knock on DePuy, but on his successors, who grew complacent in the '90s, and failed to build on his solid foundation. The follow-on steps that should have improved the Army operationally and strategically were never taken. The price for that terrible lapse was paid in Iraq from 2003 through 2006, as the Army's honed tactics lacked competent strategic direction to make them lead toward a goal. Having solid tactics without a good strategy is like driving a Ferrari without a steering wheel.

On the other hand, the Iraq War also has become notorious as a conflict in which it is almost impossible for senior officers to be relieved. A little of DePuy's old-school insistence on accountability might have been hugely helpful. WM



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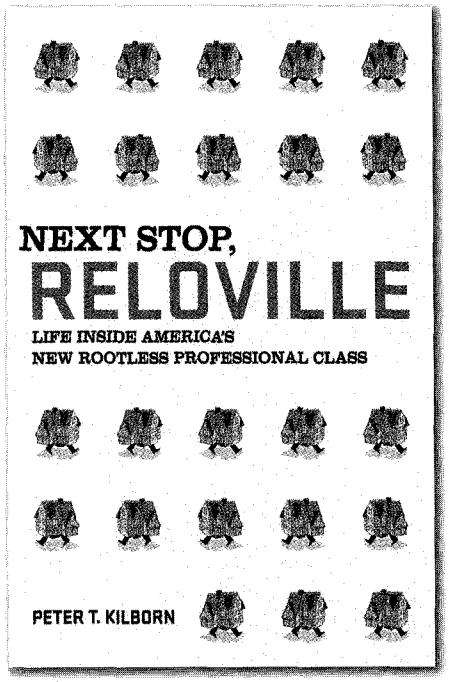
Don't Worry, Honey, You'll Make New Friends

Inside the new class of serial relocators.

By Doron Taussig



Next Stop, Reloville: Life Inside America's New Rootless Professional Class

by Peter T. Kilborn
Times Books, 272 pp.

It may not be the best time to bring this up, just when we're all hoping no other sector of the economy proves to be a house of cards, but, well ... we may have another problem with American capitalism. It may be slowly eating away at the traditional concepts of community, place, and the extended family.

Americans, we know, are an adventurous and mobile people. We like to push frontiers—move to the Big City, or Go West. But this mythology, at least in my understanding, has usually involved one, maybe two big moves. You went, you tried to make it, and eventually you settled somewhere. The class of people who kept moving—military, government, employees of a few major companies—was small.

Today, this (completely reasonable) limitation on mobility is fading: more and more Americans are jumping from job to job and state to state, moving their families at the drop of a hundred thousand dimes. They call themselves Relos, short for relocators, and in a new book called *Next Stop: Reloville*, former *New York Times* reporter Peter Kilborn says that they matter, a lot. Kilborn happened upon Relo culture a few years back, while working on that massive series about class we all read part of. He can't give us a precise figure, but he estimates that the expansion of the American economy, and trade in particular, has increased the number of serial relocators from a few hundred thousand thirty years ago to around ten million today. (He draws these numbers from stats from the Census Bureau, moving companies, and the Worldwide Employee Relocation Council, the trade group for corporate relocation managers.) Whatever their numbers, he says, the demographics of Relos give them a disproportionately large social influence.

Kilborn doesn't intend his book as a warning—he means it as a thoughtful exploration of an important phenomenon. And it is. We meet a lot of people in the Relo world and see things from a lot of different perspectives. Some of them are positive. I don't care. I still took it as bad news.

Relos are mostly white, graduates of state universities and sometimes graduate business schools, and largely Republican (though not as overwhelmingly in 2008 as in previous elections). They range from middle to upper middle to upper class, and the way they get themselves to their preferred portion of that range is by moving. Sometimes this is because they get promoted within their company: UPS, for instance, moves 1,200 to 1,300 of its 30,000 managers every year. "Relocation is just a tool of our culture," the company's PR man tells Kilborn. Sometimes they move because they get a better offer from a new employer in a different place.

Whatever the impetus, the moves are regarded as minor adjustments, inconveniences. Employers don't think twice about asking people to move because, in many cases, the bosses have moved multiple times themselves; some companies even cover the cost of the move, and will go so far as to purchase the house being left behind, to speed up the process. The Relo workforce, meanwhile, has accepted their employers' message. "Not moving suppresses your wages and career potential in today's

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global business environment," one sales analyst tells Kilborn. Relocation has become standard, normal. In fact, a whole cottage industry of specialized real estate agents and "relocation counselors" has emerged. (Most relocation management firms are less than twenty years old.) They'll rent furniture for you and ship your dog.

Of course, no relocation counselor—usually an "empathetic, college-educated woman," Kilborn writes—is going to be good enough to make a move like this gravy for everyone. The classic victims of family moves are kids, and though Kilborn throws in a couple of anecdotes about an "adventurous minority" of children who thrive jumping from place to place, we also see kids saying "I hate you" and running to their rooms to call their friends. Nor do these troubles always pass. "Frequent relocation among children," Kilborn quotes an AMA study, is "associated with higher rates of all measures of child dysfunction." Neighborhoods where Relos live are low-crime areas, but they tend to have teenage vandalism and drug use. (I also found myself wondering what effect frequent relocation has on a kid's identity. These kids aren't *from* anywhere.)

Can it be long before Sean Hannity is deriding as a lazy Socialist anybody who won't rip his daughter out of high school just before senior year? We have to be wary of how widely this "relo" lifestyle catches on, lest it be expected of more of us.

Then you have the consequences of the move for the spouse who's not taking a new job—usually the wife. Kilborn spends a chapter with Sara Carroll, whose husband, Dave, works in finance for a cell phone company. The couple moved from Seattle to Roswell, Georgia, and eventually to Maryland. In Seattle, Sara had been a civil engineer, and loved it. But, like many Relo wives, she put her career on the shelf when she moved, and spent her days strapped in her minivan—she couldn't travel on foot because the sidewalk stopped at the gate to her subdivision, and she pushed a stroller. Nor could she really make the place her home: the hardest thing for "trailing spouses," Kilborn writes, might be the "dearth of intimate friendships." He quotes an executive of a relocation firm: Relos, she says, "learn how not to get too close ... so that when a relationship ends, as their experience tells them it will, it does not hurt them too much." They might make friends, maybe even with families in a similar situation. But it's not a close bond, because everyone's moving on.

Even more depressing than the *Desperate Housewives* parts of Kilborn's book are the extended-family sections. A lot of people leave home, of course—as the economy changes and different places become industry centers, it's inevitable. But some of them can at least move within a region—and if not, if they can afford it, they can have their parents move to them. When this happens in Relo families, Kilborn calls the older movers "collateral Relos": "The parents give up their ties to a town ... to join their kids." But there's a big risk: Relos keep moving. And eventually, their parents become too feeble to move with them. They can end up in an assisted-living facility, Kilborn writes, "where they know not a soul. It is a risk that collateral Relos are willing to run as an alternative to the loneliness of rarely seeing children and grandchildren, thousands of miles away, who can't interrupt hectic lives to visit them."

I guess. I've been thinking a lot lately about how near to my parents is near enough. Currently, I'm about two hours away, and I see them fairly regularly. But I don't have kids yet, and when I do, I'll want to see them more—my grandparents were a big part of my life growing up, and a big help to my parents. It's a good set-up, I think. Everyone's family is different, of course, and I don't want to judge anyone else's choices on this kind of thing. But as a growing norm, the Relo way seems sad to me. This quote from Bradd Shore, an anthropologist at Emory, practically made me want to move into my parents' basement: "The American family lasts only a generation and a half."

There are broader effects, macro consequences of the Relo lifestyle.

The "Reloville" of Kilborn's title is not imaginary. It describes places like Alpharetta, Georgia, and Plano, Texas. Many Relovilles seem to be in the South and the West. They're near airports and transport hubs, usually well away from city centers. Kilborn makes them sound like suburbs on steroids: gated subdivisions with big houses and well-tended yards. Very vanilla, very homogeneous.

Of course, not everyone who lives in these places is a Relo. But Relos, Kilborn says, "shape and define communities. ... They exert what economists call a multiplier effect on their local economies. By buying and selling homes every three or four years ... Relos generate three or four times more business than people who move to a town to stay."

There are reasons Relos buy the homes they do. Homogeneity, for instance, gives them something familiar. "By buying new homes similar to those they leave, Relos concoct illusions of stability." They prefer for these houses to be new constructions, and avoid certain design elements like synthetic stucco (which is susceptible to water damage), because they know they may be reselling. It's as if a whole population got together and agreed to live in identical homes, so they could swap more easily. (Kilborn doesn't say much about what the housing crash has done to this arrangement, but he suggests it's not a lot, because the Relo class is so well off. I guess we'll see.)

Now, if you don't like the look of these neighborhoods, that's a matter of taste.

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But the fact that Relos know they'll be relocating also has ramifications for their community engagement: they don't really do it. At church, one pastor tells Kilborn, "nobody knows anybody." And it can be especially hard for a community to develop—by, say, taking on a big public works project—when no one is really committed to staying there.

Kilborn extrapolates further: because home values are so important to Relos, he says, home values drive public policy. He gives a bunch of examples of the consequences of this, although a lot of them end up sounding like common suburban (and even American) traits: the exclusion of mixed-income and high-density housing; the lack of walkable downtowns; segregation by income. It strikes me as a stretch to blame Relos for the isolation of poverty in the United States.

Still, the overall picture of these Relovilles isn't pretty. And yet, like I said, Kilborn doesn't really treat his subject as a problem that needs fixing. He details the negatives, yes. But he also shows us a lot of affluence and some career satisfaction, and in the end he comes around to the conclusion that this is just the reality of the global economy. He introduces us to a smart kid from the sticks who goes into computer science, and needs to leave home. "A job in the twenty-first-century global economy might displace the importance of place," he decides. A hard reality, but reality nonetheless.

I'm not so sure. Employers have asked a lot of ridiculous things from workers over the years. Sometimes workers say no.

When Kilborn talks to Relos about their choices, plenty sound unhappy—be it with traffic, the logistics of moving, the shallow friendships. Some even ask some fundamental questions, like, "How much is enough?"

"How comfortable is comfortable?" one Relo couple asks each other. "Is this fine, or is there more somewhere else and once you got there, would you say, 'Is there somewhere else that's even finer?'"

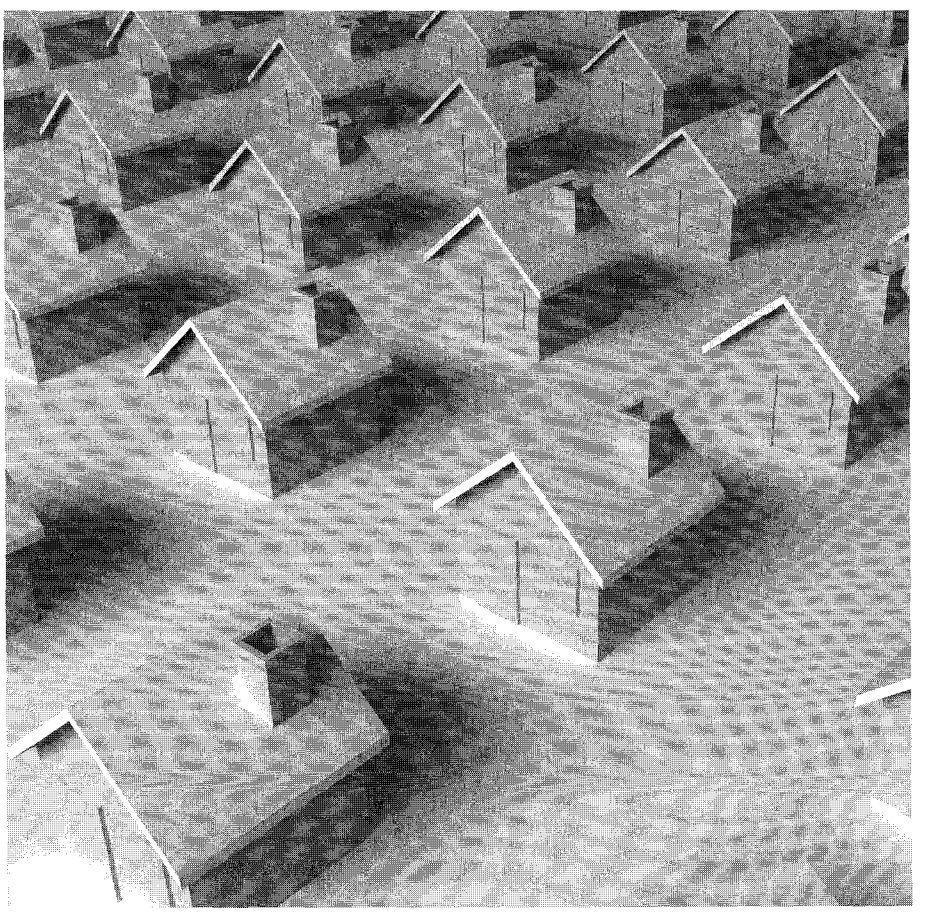
Is it impossible that Relos could start answering these questions differently? Couldn't they decide the "finer" place is just someplace you stay and build a life in?

Of course, some moves are necessary. The farm kid needs to leave home if he wants to be a computer scientist. But all these moves, over and over up the food chain? I see a couple of alternatives:

1) Say no. Granted, this isn't always an option. Sometimes the choice may be between moving and losing a job, and certainly there are situations where you don't want to take that risk. But a couple of UPS employees, for example, tell Kilborn, "If you say 'no' now, there are no bad consequences." Sometimes it's just a question of how much money you think you need. Maybe, for some of these folks, it's not as much as they thought.

2) Negotiate. In some cases here, we're talking about people who are being offered big salaries and generous relocation packages (for executives, $70,000 for moving expenses is common, Kilborn says). Companies have a lot of leverage. Is your employer sure you can't manage inventory replenishment remotely? That you need to move to Colorado to write that computer program? How about he keeps that seventy grand for now and flies you out every couple weeks?

Maybe this is presumptuous of me. Certainly we all have ambitions; frequent relocation could be right for some people. And in today's economy, people are understandably less inclined to test their employers' limits. But I just find the normalcy of Relo culture, and the readiness with which it's been accepted, disquieting. Can it be long before Sean Hannity is deriding as a lazy socialist anyone who won't rip his daughter out of her high school just before senior year? We have to be wary of how widely this lifestyle catches on, lest it be expected of more of us. I, for one, want nothing to do with it. WM



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Doron Taussig is the news editor at the *Philadelphia City Paper.*

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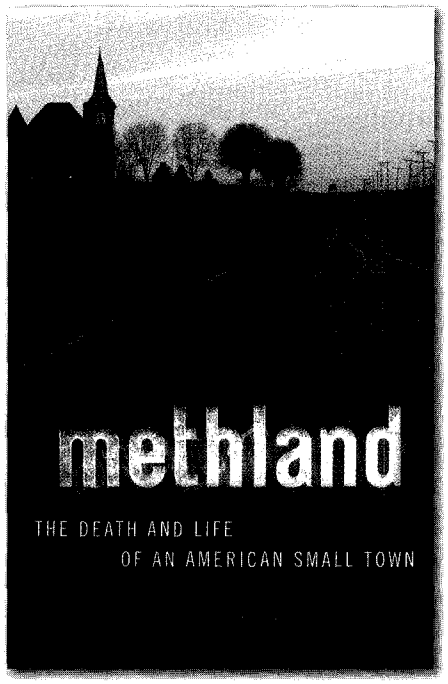
Better Living Through Chemistry



Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town

by Nick Reding
Bloomsbury, 272 pp.

What the rural Midwest's meth epidemic does, and doesn't, say about the global economy.

By Charles Homans

In an early scene in Nick Reding's *Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town*, a former meatpacker turned small-time methamphetamine cook in Oelwein, Iowa, named Roland Jarvis, inspired by a paranoid hallucination involving black helicopters, pours the hazardous chemicals comprising his home meth lab down the drain and then lights a cigarette, inadvertently blowing up his house and melting off most of his face. When the local police sergeant—a high school classmate of Jarvis's—arrives on the scene, Jarvis begs him to shoot him. No one—the cops, the paramedics, Jarvis himself—quite knows what to do. None of them has really been here before.

This, in a nutshell, is what scared Americans about methamphetamine when it began to seep into the periphery of the national consciousness, building into a full-blown panic by the mid-2000s. The drug itself, a powerful stimulant, is unpleasant enough, but as Reding observes, "[i]n truth, all drug epidemics are only in part about the drugs." What allowed meth to capture the public imagination so fully was the way in which it attacked the stories that Americans told themselves about the primordial decency of the heartland. Aside from its ease of manufacture—you can make meth out of readily available industrial and pharmaceutical products, enabling a twenty-first-century variant on the moonshiners of earlier generations such as Jarvis—the drug's most novel aspect was its clientele: the same predominantly white small-town residents who had watched the urban depredations of crack cocaine from afar and told themselves that they weren't *that* kind of people. "We're in Iowa, for God's sake," a former Oelwein high school principal, explaining his decision to request police patrols of his school, tells Reding. "We don't *do* that." In mainstream America's Rockwellian imagination, police officers in towns like Oelwein were supposed to be stopping high school kids from making out in cars on prom night. In the meth age they suddenly needed bulletproof vests and hazmat training.

An August 2005 *Newsweek* cover story proclaimed meth to be "America's Most Dangerous Drug," which is highly debatable—there are gaping holes in the statistics cited by both the alarmists and the skeptics. As *Methland*'s title suggests, Reding, a magazine writer, tends toward the former. His account of meth's rise in the rural Midwest does not skimp on the grisly details; he paints a noir-ish picture of the region in which DEA agents set up meetings with drug informants in abandoned county airports, and vultures look on hungrily as detectives exhume the bodies of murder victims hastily stashed under semi trailers.

But Reding's ultimate aim is more subtle than that: he wants to situate the meth phenomenon as part and parcel of the broader economic and social forces that transformed the rural Midwest, in often wrenching ways, in the late twentieth century. The drug's Middle American evolution, he argues, was a basically ra-

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tional product of a global economy that in many respects has not been much more forgiving to rural America's residents than the drug trade. "[M]eth has always been less an agent of change and more of a symptom of it," he writes. "The end of a way of life is the story; the drug is what signaled to the rest of the nation that the end had come."

Methland consists of two loosely braided narratives, one wide angled and the other tightly focused. The first is an account of the twenty-year rise of methamphetamine in the rural Midwest, a story that actually begins some time earlier: in the decades following World War II, when the region played host to a dramatic increase in agricultural productivity. Thanks to advances in pesticides, fertilizers, and bioengineering, heartland exports boomed, and farmers in the Midwest eager to sell in expanding global markets began borrowing against what seemed like a limitless future. But when commodity prices fell in the early '80s, states like Iowa and Nebraska found themselves in deep financial trouble, and a cascade of farm foreclosures ensued. Meanwhile, industrial agriculture corporations like Monsanto and Cargill, which had grown enormous off the spoils of the Green Revolution, were rapidly gathering under their corporate umbrellas as many links of the production and distribution process—trucking companies, grocery stores, and other once-independent enterprises—as they could. By the mid-'80s, once-robust regional rural economies were reduced to a patchwork of company towns, little different on paper from the corrosive resource-extraction economies of Appalachia's coal-mining country.

It was around this time that a nineteen-year-old named Lori Kaye Arnold did her first two lines of methamphetamine, on the kitchen table of her cabin outside of Ottumwa, Iowa. Meth was not a new drug; it had first been synthesized by a Japanese chemist nearly a century earlier. It had only recently fallen from favor as a legal prescription narcotic, and had previously been employed by long-haul truckers to keep them from wrecking their rigs on the Interstate, advertised in women's magazines to weary housewives to increase their general perkiness, and prescribed to American GIs, as well as most of their allies and enemies, during World War II. As the legal market for meth had dwindled, however, a burgeoning illegal trade had emerged, built on a small coterie of professional suppliers in Southern California and a network of motorcycle gangs that distributed the drug elsewhere. This was how Arnold, the wife of a member of the Grim Reapers biker gang—and the sister, as it happens, of comedian Tom Arnold—got ahold of it. But it was her own innovations to this system in the late '80s that transformed meth into a rural midwestern phenomenon. After first setting up Ottumwa as the premier heartland distribution hub for Californian meth, Arnold decided to borrow a page from Monsanto and better integrate her supply chain, building her own production facilities—the first midwestern meth lab—in Iowa.

In this effort, the crumbled local agricultural economy turned out to be a boon. Falling tax revenues had left local law enforcement underfunded, understaffed, and unable to stop her. Hard-up fertilizer suppliers and farmers were happy to cut deals on large volumes of anhydrous ammonia, a fertilizer ingredient that is also used in meth processing. And unlike other drugs, meth didn't require contraband raw materials from South America or Southeast Asia. Its most exotic ingredient, ephedrine, was also used to manufacture cold medication—which meant that efforts by the DEA to place restrictions on its importation were routinely thwarted by the pharmaceutical lobby and its congressional champions, such as Senator Orrin Hatch, who guaranteed that ephedrine would remain free of federal regulation. Not since Prohibition had an illegal drug been so easy to make inconspicuously by anyone with a high school–grade knowledge of chemistry. In 2004, law enforcement officials busted 1,370 meth labs in Arnold's home state alone.

Methland's second narrative starts circa 2005 in Oelwein, a town of a little less than seven thousand that grew up around a now-much-diminished meatpacking industry. In the still-reverberating aftershocks of the farm crisis, Oelwein has been reduced to scrapping with a suburb of Mumbai for a new call center to keep its local economy afloat. Reding chooses the town less for the severity of its meth problem—it's bad, but not the worst—than for Oelwein's ability to serve as the iconic American Small Town of the book's subtitle. He follows an ensemble cast of locals—the mayor, a county prosecutor, a doctor, an unrepentant meth addict, and a recovering one—over several years, from 2005 to 2008, as they wrestle professionally and personally with Oelwein's meth problem.

Reding's group portrait is nuanced and complex in a way that journalists' depictions of the rural Midwest rarely are; he has a keen eye for details, noticing one of his characters' hint of a Minnesotan accent, "extending each opening syllable toward the innards of a word."

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cent, "extending each opening syllable toward the innards of a word." He observes his subjects at close range—often uncomfortably so, dutifully chronicling the toll that Oelwein's cultural and economic upheavals take on the prosecutor's love life, and the way that Roland Jarvis finesses a Bic lighter with the nubs of his lost fingers to light his pipe, his eyes "as wildly dilated as a patient waiting in the low light of an ophthalmologist's office."

Jarvis notwithstanding, meth itself turns out to be just one of many problems for most of Reding's subjects. They are concerned with their own jobs, community development projects, and the knock-on effects of life in economically and socially turbulent circumstances. One of the better characters in *Methland* is Dr. Clay Hallberg, a garrulous general practitioner in Oelwein who plays in a cover band on weekends and is fond of holding forth on Noam Chomsky. Reding watches Hallberg struggle with the future of his practice, which he has inherited from his father, while simultaneously stumbling into alcoholism, ultimately drying himself out after wrecking his truck in a cornfield. Oelwein's meth problem, which Hallberg mostly encounters via the related ailments of his patients, is simply one more thing he has on his plate. This is more or less the plight of the rural Midwest in miniature, and Reding doesn't pretend to offer much in the way of solutions.

Unfortunately, Reding pushes the big-think conceit of *Methland* a bit too far, trying to fit drug traffickers in a geostrategic context as a sort of geographically dispersed "disconnected state," drawing strained parallels between Mexican drug cartels and American pharmaceutical companies, and generally struggling for a unified theory of "the meaning of meth." None of it adds up to much, in large part because in Reding's otherwise fine telling, the meaning of meth is a whole lot simpler than all that: it is that capitalism, for better or worse, is a destructive force, and woefully unforgiving of those who don't adapt. In *Methland*'s most illuminating scene, Lori Arnold emerges from serving a nine-year prison term to find that the meth economy she built in Ottumwa has been completely transformed, her own product supplanted by a purer variety shipped in bulk from California and Mexico. For two years, Arnold works menial meatpacking and fast-food jobs while she methodically searches for her niche in the new supply chain. The rough-and-tumble world of commercial enterprise, Arnold knows by now, isn't going to cut anyone a break, even an innovator like herself. WM

Charles Homans is an editor of the *Washington Monthly.*

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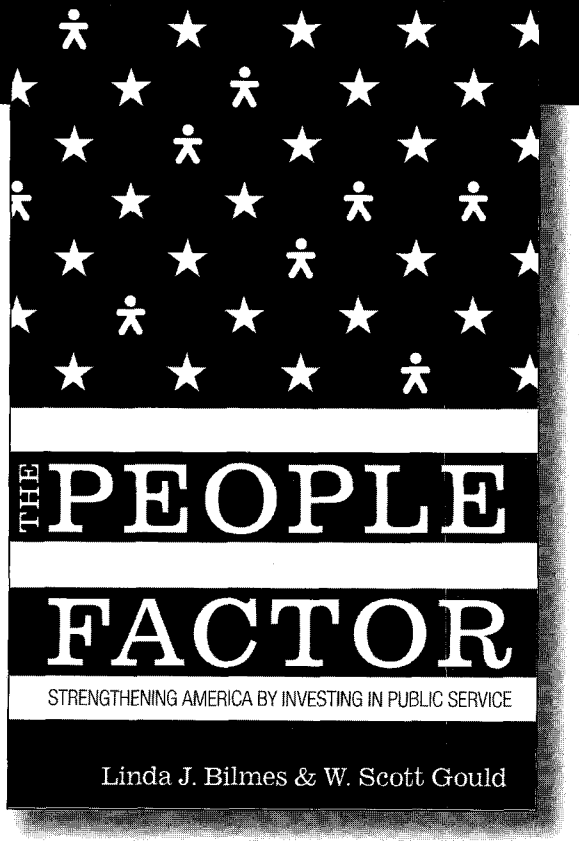

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unions at various Coca-Cola bottling plants that lasted through the 1990s and beyond; during that time, six union organizers, a pro-union manager, and a pro-union worker were murdered, the last on plant premises. In Turkey, the Coca-Cola bottler drove down workers' wages, fired organizers, and dismissed scores of union members; during a particularly sensitive point in the negotiations, the bottler thought it helpful to bring riot police into the room.

In two separate locations in India, bottling plants were heedlessly built in traditionally drought-plagued locations, with the altogether predictable result that producing the water-based beverage further lowered the water table and drove the local farmers into destitution. In one community, farmers who before the coming of Coca-Cola had been able to pump water up from a depth of thirty-five feet using a three-horsepower motor are now required to go down to 125 feet and use a fifteen-horsepower motor.

In Mexico, the Coca-Cola bottler used bullying and, as a court later found, monopolistic business practices against mom-and-pop groceries, cutting off shipments of Coke products to the stores and confiscating their coolers in an attempt to keep a cheaper competitor off the shelves. In El Salvador, Coke's fealty to the United Nations campaign against child labor extended to prohibiting the use of child workers by immediate suppliers while turning a blind eye to those further up the supply chain. So while no children work in the sugar mill where the bottler gets its sugar, many work in the fields of the plantations where the sugar cane is grown.

It doesn't take a scholar of fine print to see what the corporate chiefs in charge of this great American brand have to say about these inarguably sad situations: Don't blame us. They are quick to attribute all these actions to independent bottling companies, who have so little to do with the big corporation they may as well be called Pepsi. Of course, that is a mighty slender reed to lean upon. And since a new law was passed permitting foreign corporations to be sued in U.S. courts, Coca-Cola has struggled to pull off the amazing trick of simultaneously distancing itself from the most odious practices of some of the independent bottlers while at the same time maintaining profitable relationships with them. The company's spokespeople tell Thomas that Coca-Cola is attempting to push its bottlers to adopt better labor practices. And perhaps that is the case; a labor settlement has indeed been offered to union members in Colombia, for instance. The offer, however, requires the workers to leave the union and to never discuss Coca-Cola for the rest of their natural lives.

What Thomas really wants is for Coca-Cola to take some moral high ground and deprive errant local bottlers of their supply to the secret formula that gives Coke its happiness mojo, or, failing that, to have its corporate spokespeople admit that we live in a morally murky world where even people who underwrite the Olympics and fill the Obama White House with Diet Coke sometimes end up doing business in ways that are, well, exploitative. Smoothies that they are, Coke's mouthpieces never yield to Thomas's sallies. Indeed, in one of the most dryly amusing moments in the book, Thomas records his effort to schedule an interview with Ed Potter, who is Coke's global workplace rights director, while Potter is trying to escape after a Parliamentary hearing. Thomas asks Potter for five minutes sometime during the company's upcoming annual meeting, and Potter responds, "Well, if it was up to me ... you know, back when I was a lawyer I would have said yes but ..." Potter then motions toward an approaching pack of Coca-Cola PR staff. Thomas asks him, "In principle, would you mind?" Potter says, "In principle no, I don't mind."

As we learn, this will not be the only instance when the principle of a Coke executive is not acted upon.

Of course, the corporation can't blame everything Thomas has discovered on rogue Third World bottlers. Thomas also discusses how the company is shutting down a plant in Drogheda, Ireland, which produces most of the concentrate that gets sent to Coke bottlers throughout the world. Each gallon of concentrate is good for about 50,000 drinks, and the Drogheda plant makes about eight million gallons a year, at a cost of $3.67 a gallon. But the plant, which is heavily unionized, is being replaced by another Irish plant—in Ballina—which is not unionized, and where the cost per unit is $2.60. Drogheda's workers are out of luck, but before you get all caught up feeling their pain, feel some of your own. The reason the secret ingredient is made in Ireland instead of, say, Georgia, is that this signature American corporation finds it cheaper to locate operations in tax-friendly countries like Ireland and pay shipping charges. Washington's tax losses are measured in the hundreds of millions.

Most of *Belching Out the Devil* consists of Thomas's trips to the plants in contention and his visits with the men and women, the farmers and factory workers and store owners and housewives, who have had their lives made miserable by the misbehavior of people acting in the name of Coke. Thomas does a good job of keeping the story moving, leavening his high dudgeon with sharp sarcastic wit—"The answer lies in the statistic. Oh yes, my friend, statistic: the thinking man's lie"—and lightening his story's misery index with bemused observations and tales of local color. In Mexico, for example, Coca-Cola has managed to infiltrate ancient Mayan religious rites. In one ceremony, candles represent fire, pine needles represent the earth, and Coca-Cola represents water. A guide explains that Coke has "another element, the gas," which causes burping, "which throws out the bad energy ... the ghosts, the nightmares, everything bad." It turns out that the ceremonial burping used to be induced with fermented corn. But corn takes eight days of fermentation to achieve prime burpability, whereas all you have to do with Coke is pop the top.

Alas, as Thomas has shown us, it will take more than a few belches to disperse the bad spirits induced by Coke. Meanwhile, I'm making the switch to Pepsi, at least until Thomas writes a sequel. WM

Jamie Malanowski, former editor at *Playboy* and *Spy* magazine, is a writer living in New York. His most recent book is *The Coup*, a satire about the nation's capital.

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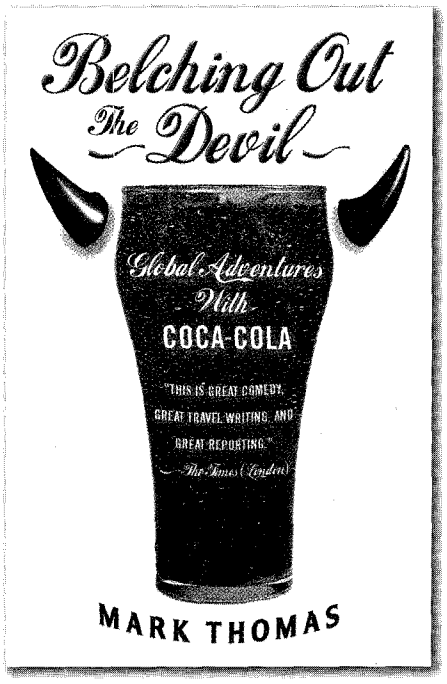
Coke and Me

A Michael Moore–like British journalist investigates the world's top soft-drink maker.

By Jamie Malanowski



Belching Out the Devil: Global Adventures With Coca-Cola

by Mark Thomas
Nation Books, 384 pp.

Had I known anything about Mark Thomas or his new book, *Belching Out the Devil: Global Adventures With Coca-Cola*, I might not have accepted the opportunity to write this review with such alacrity. I have, you see, a strong historical and emotional attachment to the book's subject matter. For a half century, one member or another of the Coca-Cola family of sweet fizzy beverages—Coke, Diet Coke, Tab, Sprite, even Orange and Grape Fanta—have been a treasured staple in my diet. At every phase of my life, Coke has meant party, reward, relaxation, fun. Since high school, I have been a cheap Coca-Cola hophead who even now prefers to get his caffeine from a can of Diet Coke rather than a cup of Starbucks. Throughout my adulthood, I have been defiant about my palate's beverage preferences, a happy ignoramus who prefers Coke over any product from Napa Valley, a man content to sit mute during discussions of the comparative merits of single-malt scotches, but an authority on where in the tristate area the price of a two-liter bottle of Coke has fallen below ninety-nine cents. Somewhere in the bowels of Coke's global headquarters in Atlanta, there sits a bean counter who annually projects without a second thought a transfer of several hundred dollars from my coffers to Coke's.

Well, thanks to Mark Thomas's book, that bean counter is going to have another think coming.

Thomas, as those of you with a transatlantic pop cultural field of reference may know, is a British comedian who came to prominence as a reporter and presenter for the BBC. Edgy and often profane, Thomas has a decided pro-proletarian bias. (He is, after all, the son of a midwife and a self-employed builder.) He specializes in pulling off the audacious stunt that rudely undercuts a powerful person and places him on the defensive—think the English Michael Moore, although Thomas does not seem so unabashedly unkempt. It was Thomas, for example, who revealed how rich Britons were avoiding inheritance tax by declaring that the art, furniture, homes, and land they had been bequeathed were exempt from being taxed because they were available for public viewing. Thomas staked out Nicholas Soames, a Tory member of Parliament and the grandson of Winston Churchill, and pursued him relentlessly, asking to see the heirlooms kept in his home. Eventually Soames paid the tax, and the loophole was closed.

Thomas also fought an effort by police to keep mass demonstrations out of Parliament Square—too noisy, too unruly, and too unpredictable—by requiring demonstrators to get a permit and limiting the amount of space said demonstrations could occupy. Thomas made nonsense of the regulation by recruiting a huge number of lone protestors who inveighed against everything from war to the deplanetization of Pluto.

In short, Thomas is just the sort of fellow I would normally welcome as amusing and provocative, but whom I have now discovered poking around uninvited inside my refrigerator.

And thank goodness. Ignoring the obvious targets of overweight children with rotting teeth and diabetes, Thomas hits the road and finds that Coke, despite its playful Christmas polar bears, Norman Rockwell associations, and wanting to teach the world to sing, has not been what you would want to call a perfect corporate citizen.

In Colombia, for example, right-wing paramilitary groups with ties to the army and the drug cartels waged a campaign of violence and intimidation against the trade

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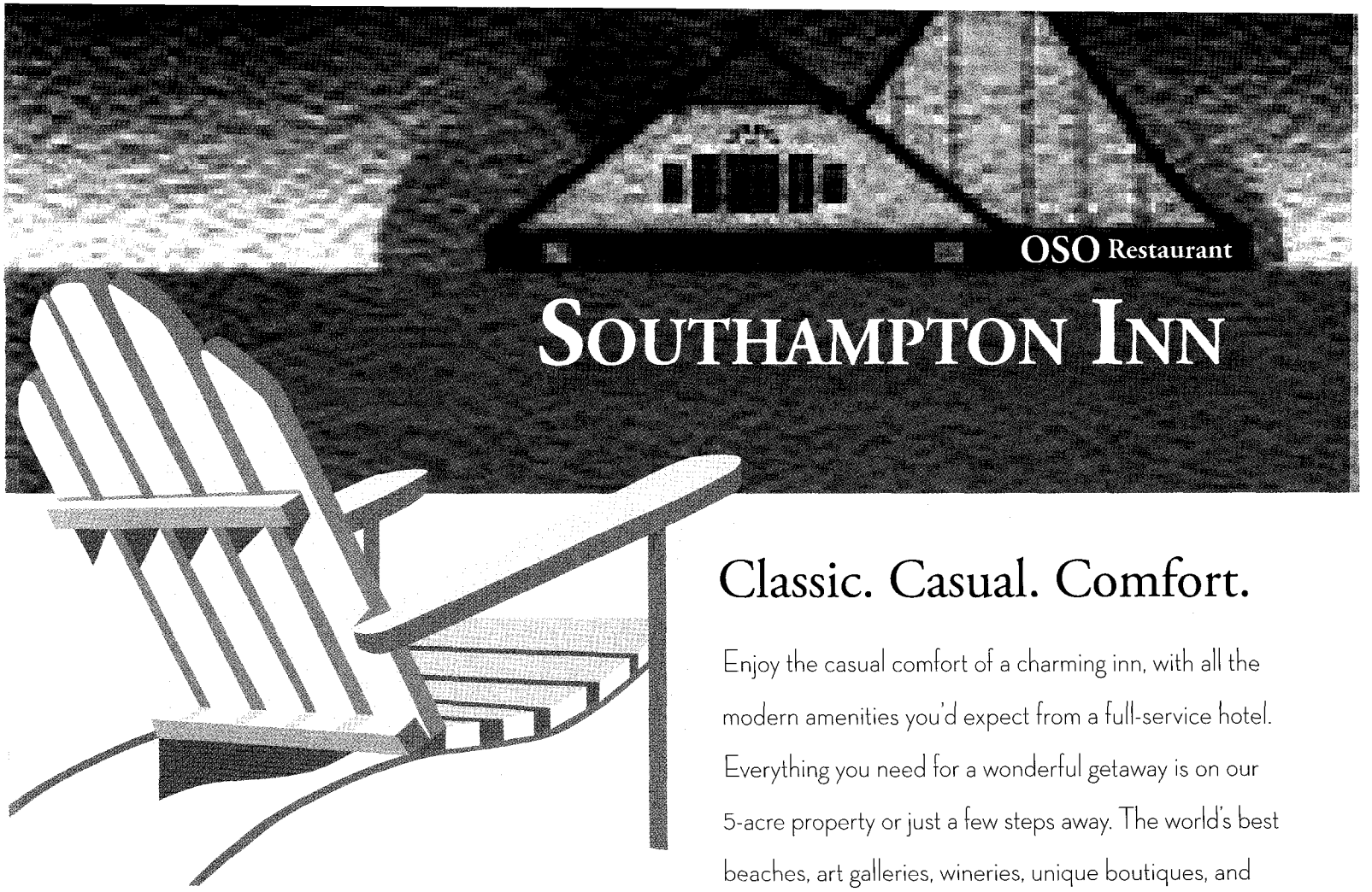

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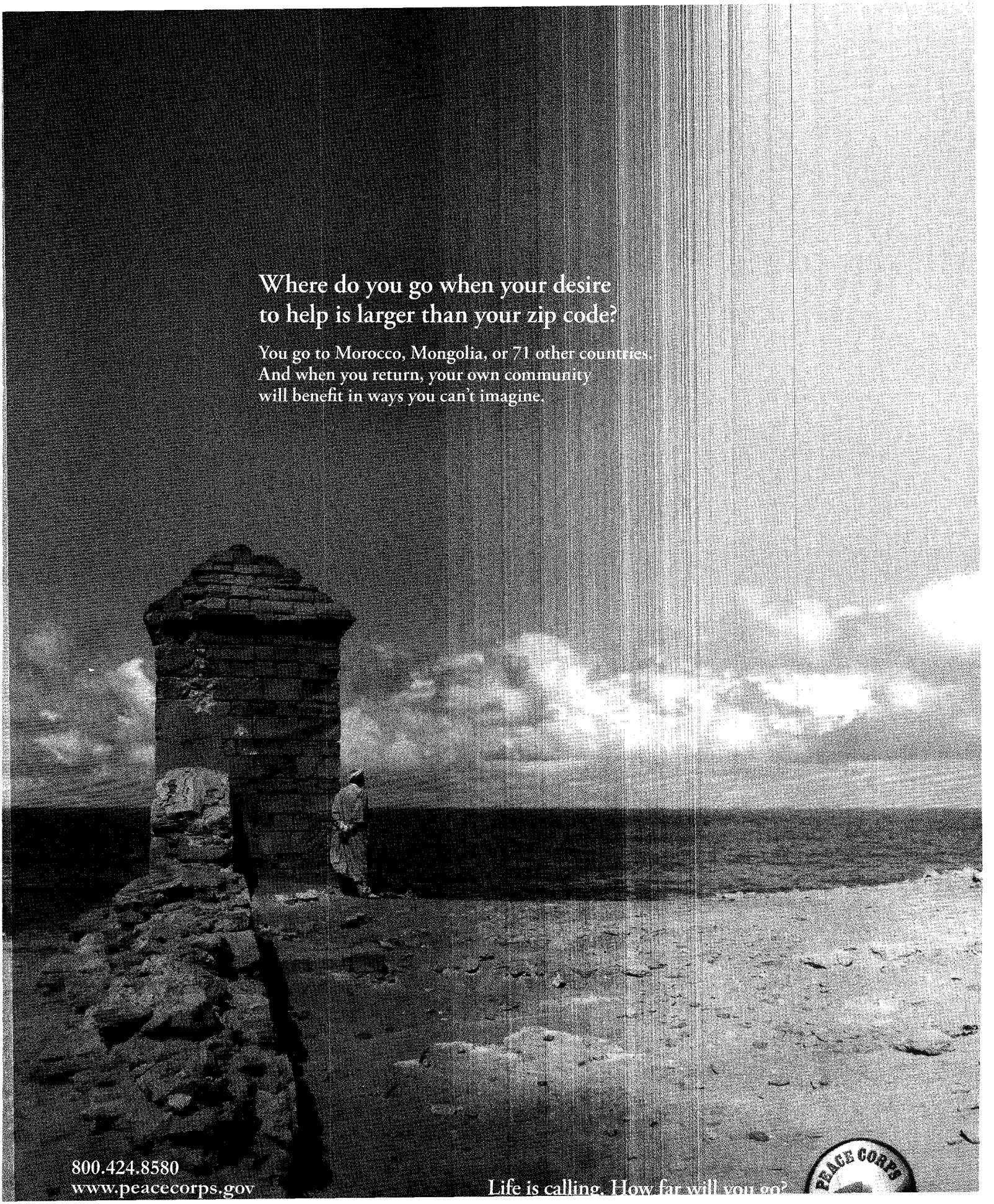

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